Table of Contents

1. Alligiances
2. Prologue
3. A Step Into the Sun
4. The Start of Apprenticeship
5. Missed Prey, and Mentor Trouble
6. Frustration and Sibling Disputes
7. A Malicious Couple
8. A Gathering Gone Wrong
9. The Accident
10. Taken by the Stars
11. Nightmares
12. Survivors' Guilt
13. A Haunted Reflection
14. A Message From the Stars
15. Tumblesoar's Story
16. The Start of the Assesement
17. Overshadowed
18. Betrayed by Blood
19. Excuses
20. War on the Horizon
21. Murderer
22. Alone
23. Announcement...

Alligiances

[image]

BleakClan:

Leader: *Adderstar*, a huge, short-furred, bushy-tailed, white and black tom with ice-blue eyes, large paws, and a low, smooth voice.

Deputy: *Lynxfury*, a stout, long-furred, bob-tailed pale brown rosetted she-cat with long fangs and yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat: *Frostedmoss*, a skinny, small, pale gray tom with white patches and green eyes.

Warriors:

Wailingwind, a tall, stocky, dark brown tom with black patches and large, sorrowful amber eyes.

Wolfwhisper, a quiet, peaceful, dark gray (Almost black) tom with paler paws and large, pale, tufted ears and blue eyes. Is missing a toe from Frostbite.

Apprentice *Bearpaw*.

Darkdaisy, a muscular, thick-furred, pale gray she-cat with black leopardlike spots covering her pelt and deep, dark blue eyes.

Pinestalk, a heavyset, medium-furred dark ginger tom with small spatters of gray all over his flanks and shoulders and blueish gray eyes.

Batwhistle, a small, stout, jet-black she-cat with dark amber eyes and a bat-wing shape on her flank.

Witheredcry, a muscular, long-furred, black and gray striped tom with tattered ears and blue eyes.

Flurryflank, a sleek, medium-furred white she-cat with a black patch on her flank and blue eyes.

Thawedsnow, a round, stout, dark tan, and white tom with blue eyes and long claws.

Coldcloud, a long-furred, stout, very pale gray tabby she-cat with white patches and pale amber eyes, and a short, ragged tail.

Tumblesoar, a clumsy, medium-furred, blue tabby tom with a long, snakelike tail and green eyes.

Queens:

Gentlebreeze, a beautiful, long-furred, cream and gray patched she-cat with amber eyes. (Mate: Ashenwater, deceased)

Hopekit, a smart, fluffy-furred pale cream she-cat with large tufted ears, a ginger stripe down her back and two ginger paws, with one amber and one golden eye.

Bluekit, a competitive, thick-furred blueish-gray tom with large blue eyes and white patches covering his pelt.

Screechkit, a twiglike, stunted cream tabby tom with one white paw, pale yellow eyes and a long fluffy tail.

Brookspirit, a sweet, short-furred diluted tortoiseshell she-cat with greenish-yellow eyes, a long fluffy tail and a tattered ear. (Mate: Witheredcry)

Emeraldkit, an unusual, pretty, black she-cat with white dapples covering her whole body and piercing green eyes.

Apprentices:

Bearpaw, a large, shaggy-furred dark brown tabby tom with a stumpy tail.

Elders:
Elkantler, a grumpy, skinny mottled brown and gray tom with amber eyes, retired early due to extreme frostbite.

Harepad, an ancient, long-furred white and dark gray she-cat with two missing toes, mostly deaf and blind.

Stumpshadow, a short-legged, stumpy-tailed, very dark ginger tom with brown paws and ears and blue eyes.

MeadowClan:

Leader: *Quailstar*, a clever, brave, green-eyed, brown she-cat with white dapples and a stumpy tail.

Deputy: *Gopherleap* a loyal, very short-furred, yellow-eyed, pale brown and gray tom with a tattered ear.

Medicine cat: *Palebriar*, a quiet, slim, blue-eyed, pale gray she-cat with rosy ginger patches.

Warriors:

Sandytunnel, a swift, intelligent, green-eyed, pale ginger tom with a white belly.

Burrowfuzz, a wise, green-eyed, tan tom with cream spots and scruffy, fuzzy fur.

Pigeonsneeze, an empathetic, pale green-eyed, tortoiseshell nonbinary cat, with a long tail.

Eveningbreeze, an honest, blue-eyed, honey-coloured she-cat with a long, whispy tail.

Apprentice, *Morningpaw*.

Starlingthorn, a standoffish, green-eyed, dark gray tom with white speckles.

Bravewhisper, a confidant, green-eyed, pale tabby tom with white paws and tail tip.

Apprentice, *Fallenpaw*.

Sunnysigh, a polite, yellow-eyed, bright yellow cat with darker paws and a notched ear.

Ambereyes, a quiet, pale ginger cat with darker paws and two different coloured eyes.

Dreammist, a fun-loving, pale blue-eyed, pale gray she-cat with silver paws and patches.

Vixenslip, a curious, yellowish green-eyed, ginger tabby she-cat.

Queens:

Orchidwish, a compassionate, green-eyed, cream she-cat with white paws and dapples (Mate: Unknown.)

Puddlekit, a shy, copper-eyed, black she-kit with bright orange splotches.

Pollenkit, a silly, yellow-eyed, pale cream she-kit.

Pearlkit, a patient, pale green-eyed, white she-kit with a stubby tail.

Bumblebreeze, a sweet, amber-eyed, yellow she-cat with black paws (Mate: *Starlingthorn*)

Echokit, a brave, blue-eyed, mottled she-kit

Hootkit, a loud, pale-eyed, cream-tabby tom with black stripes

Apprentices:

Morningpaw, a small, sleek, pale gray she-cat with large blue eyes, and short fur.

Fallenpaw, a sleek, long-limbed, tortoiseshell intersex cat, with large amber eyes and a long tail.

Elders:

Larklily, a raspy, green-eyed, white-dappled she-cat with multiple

scars.

Molepounce, a grumpy, milky-eyed, brown tabby tom.

Parsleylight, a wise, green-eyed, black and white she-cat with folded ears and blind eyes.

RippleClan:

Leader: *Ospreystar*, a wise, very short-furred black and white patched she-cat with aqua eyes.

Deputy: *Mintbreeze*, a slight, lithe, white tom with brown patches and brilliant green eyes.

Medicine Cats: *Ebonybounce*, a tall, graceful, jet-black she-cat with icy blue eyes, and a long feathery tail.

Warriors:

Willowsloe, a quiet, lithe, pale gray mottled she-cat with blue eyes, a scar on her shoulder and a large neck ruff.

Fishflash, a tall, muscular lavender and black tom with very large front paws and aqua blue eyes.

Goosetrickle, a handsome, angular, dark gray tom with pale flecks of white and gray, and blue eyes.

Lichenburr, a confidant, large, cream and pale gray striped tom with yellow eyes, a white belly and a stump tail.

Ottersplash, a kind, agile, colorpoint tom with a dark gray muzzle, tail and paws, and blue eyes.

Crystalbloom, a graceful, swift, pure snowy white she-cat with black rosettes on her flanks and icy blue eyes.

Lilacwhisp, a small, beautiful, calico she-cat with patches of gray and lavender, and turquoise eyes.

Apprentice, *Swanpaw*.

Swiftslip, a clumsy, sleek, white tom with stark stripes of black, a tattered ear and dark green eyes.

Cypressdew, a tall, endearing, dark gray tabby with a white belly and blue eyes (they prefer to be called 'they' not she or he)

Apprentice, *Shiverpaw*.

Deepwater, a slick, muscular, short-furred shadowy gray and black tom with very dark blue eyes, and a single white tip on his tail.

Heronrain, a large, jokester, cloudy gray tom with small dark speckles shaped like raindrops covering his pelt, and yellowish green eyes.

Drizzlecreek, an empathetic, sleek, cream-and-white she-cat with blue eyes and a very fluffy tail.

Queens:

Silverbrook, a sweet, white she-cat with pale gray patches, curled ears, blue/violet eyes and short legs and medium-length fur. (Mate: *Lichenburr*)

Clearkit, an adorable, tiny, deaf and mostly mute, white she-kit with gray ears and paws, and blue eyes.

Minnowmarsh, an attentive, sleek, pale brown tabby she-cat with green eyes. (Mate: *Goosetrickle*)

Mudkit, a bullying, heavyset, dark brown and black patched tom with blue eyes.

Snakekit, a sly, sleek, pale brown, tan and gray tom with blue eyes and a pointy tail.

Greenkit, a timid, stout, dark gray tabby she-kit with black paws and green eyes.

Apprentices:

Swanpaw, a sleek, slightly clumsy, white she-cat with jet black

tabby stripes, tipped with a dot of gray, blueish violet eyes and black paws.

Shiverpaw: a bold, tall, black she-cat covered in white rosettes, with pale blue eyes and a white paw.

Elders:

Pebbleperch, a standoffish, stocky, gray tom with pebble-like speckles covering his shoulders and back. Deaf in both ears due to a water pressure incident.

Stormwatcher, a prophetic, slightly crazy, very dark gray tom with a white belly, fading patches of white covering his pelt, and one blind eye. Retired Medicine Cat.

EmberClan:

Leader: *Flickerstar*, a calloused, heavyset, black tom with ginger dapples fading to black from his shoulders to his flanks, and smouldering amber eyes.

Deputy: *Cinderburr*, a snappy, slender, very dark gray she-cat with long, messy fur, a jagged scar on her neck, two black paws and dark hazel eyes.

Medicine Cat: *Copperblaze*, a quiet, skinny, dark ginger tom with thin tabby stripes, amber eyes and a limp leg**.**

Warriors:

Nettlefrost, a strong, heavyset, very pale ginger tom with darker paws, ears and tail, a shredded ear and dull hazel eyes.

Brokenwhistle, a skinny, battle-scarred, dark gray she-cat with patches of black and pale gray, and amber eyes.

Scorchhaze, a battle-hungry, angsty, dark ginger and dark brown tom with shredded ears, a nearly furless tail from a fire accident, and amber eyes.

Darkfury, a muscular, cynical, reddish bronze and black striped tom

with amber eyes, and large dark paws.

Apprentice, *Obsidianpaw*.

Clovethorn, an unfriendly, cold, pale brown tom with thornlike stripes on his shoulders and back, and yellow eyes.

Ambersparks, a cowardly, lithe, bright ginger she-cat with amber eyes, a stump of a tail, and no claws on the left front paw.

Lionscar, a heavyset, sadistic, golden brown tabby tom with hazel eyes, a large scar snaking from his flank to his shoulder, and large front paws.

Ashwhistle, an antisocial, aloof, black she-cat with tiny gray flecks, hazel eyes and a slight wheezy whistle in her mew.

Twigflame, a sly, muscular, dappled brown white and black tom with amber eyes, and a long, thin, twiglike tail.

Apprentice, *Flintpaw*.

Antlerscratch, a tall, battle-scarred, pale ginger tom with dark antlerlike markings all over his pelt, and large slim ears.

Charredspark, an intelligent, large, mottled brown and ginger she-cat with yellowish amber eyes, and long dark whiskers.

Apprentice, *Rubypaw*.

Gingerfire, a small, short-tempered, dull ginger she-cat with a pale belly and pale paws and amber eyes.

Rosehip, a small, boastful, white she-cat with ginger patches, a notched ear and pale amber eyes. (Formerly a Rogue)

Queens:

Fadedflower, a serious, long-furred, misty gray she-cat with large ears, and sad, yellow eyes. (Mate: Darkfury)

Scarletkit, a slender, narrow-minded, dark ginger she-kit with a

black, wing-shaped marking on each shoulder, a black cape on her back, and firey amber eyes.

Diamondkit, a swift, empathetic, pale misty gray tabby she-cat with very pale yellow eyes and a scar over her nose.

Russetstump, a calm, lazy, ginger she-cat with dark tabby stripes, a stumpy tail, small ears and yellow eyes. (Expecting Lionscar's kits)

Apprentices:

Obsidianpaw, a cruel, sturdy, dark gray and black, medium-furred tom with aqua blue eyes and a few black markings.

Flintpaw, a short-legged, dishonest, mottled gray and brown tom with black paws and amber eyes.

Rubypaw, a small, clingy, ginger she-cat with reddish brown ears and tail, amber eyes and a snubbed muzzle.

Elder:

Smokehaze is an aggressive, dark smokey gray tom with yellow eyes, and permanently burned paw pads.

Cats Outside the Clans:

Heather, a empathetic, lavender and gray she-cat with violet-blue eyes, a short fluffy tail and long, graceful legs.

Ram, a tall, broad-shouldered dark brown tom with white patches, an odd, horn-shaped marking near his ear and yellow eyes.

Primrose, a small, non-commital, black she-cat with a pink, petal-like nose and green eyes.

Fun Fact: You can learn more about these four Clans in my FanClan book!

Prologue

[image]

Ashenwater's litter, Hopekit, Bluekit and Screechkit.

The wind howled with a brutal ferocity that the cats of BleakClan hadn't known in moons. Shrieking, it drove every kit, elder and warrior to their dens, cozily nestled in the heart of the mountain, despite how starving they were.

All but one cat.

Ashenwater trudged through belly-high snow, his blueish-gray tabby fur draping an emaciated form. He had to find food for his mate, who had started to bear an accidental litter of kits. It was a bad time. An awful time even, but the kits were going to arrive, whether they were prepared or not. And if Gentlebreeze didn't have food, they wouldn't make it.

With a hiss, he plunged into powder up to his ears, fighting to get his head above the crust and to keep it there. He couldn't scent so much as a vole, and his head spun as he drew heaving sob-like breaths, watching grimly as the blizzard raged harder and harder, enveloping him in the bitter, unending cold.

He felt his limbs going stiff, and his mind was hazy. *I can't go like this. Gentlebreeze needs me!* The thought gave him strength, but soon enough, that strength was gone, sapped away by the ice-cold wind. *BleakClan cats have been born and bred for the snow and cold. I'm not going to let a little blizzard send me to the stars.*

But slowly, with a sinking heart, Ashenwater realized he was lost. Nothing looked familiar, and he was so, so cold... Defeated, he sank to his belly, visions of his stunning mate, and unborn kits- *Kits I'll probably never meet*- drifting through his numbing head. Ashenwater's blue eyes fluttered closed, eyelids heavy with ice and snow.

The tempest had been deafening, but he realized it was becoming hushed. His very blood seemed to be turning to ice, and he let his head rest on the drifts. He was too hungry, too cold, too hopeless. There was nothing he could do except surrender to the blizzard. *I hope The Land of Shining Stars takes me. And I hope Gentlebreeze is alright...*

He drifted away on a cloud of numb serenity, conflicted thoughts growing foggy and disappearing.

~❄~

"Welcome, Ashenwater. You have lived a fulfilling and noble life, and now reside in The Land of Shining Stars." Ashenwater let out a sigh of relief, breathing in the warm air of the afterlife.

He glanced at the cat that had come to greet him, a starry white tom with piercing amber eyes. "Can you tell me anything about my mate and kits? Are they okay?" The white tom dipped his head. "Your mate bore three kits, just after you left to find food. You have two sons and a daughter." Joy welled in Ashenwater's chest.

"But, your kits have a difficult life ahead of them." A shimmering image materialized out of stars, showing a little cream-coloured she-kit, with a ginger stripe down her back, and several other ginger markings. "This is your daughter, Hopekit." *That was the name we decided on if we were to have a daughter!* He realized, and although he had never met this kit, he already felt a deep fondness for her.

The stars changed their image again, to an older version of Hopekit. She was missing most of her tail, and she looked scarred. Inside and out. "A terrible tragedy will befall her. Her thoughts will start to shift, she will become bitter and withdrawn." Dread began to creep into Ashenwater's heart. "Wait, I don't want to see this. Can I see my sons? My mate?" The starry guide shook his head, intense amber eyes glowing with boundless wisdom. "No. This is something you must see."

He paused for a moment. The image changed again, this time to a warrior-aged Hopekit. "As an adult, she will briefly find peace. But,

it will not last." The stars shifted slightly again, this time showing his daughter with her mouth drawn open in a wail or scream. She looked... Insane. "No! No, please, I don't want to see any more."

The star-speckled cat began to speak in a low, steady voice. "Dark thoughts poison this young cat's mind. Insane, enraged, and broken, inside and out, this cat's destiny is anything but peaceful."

"Is there anything I can do?!"

"Walk in her dreams. You can try to lead her, but you must not reveal her impending fate. It will be difficult, and destressing."

"What happens if it doesn't work? What will happen to her?" Desperate now, he scrambled for answers.

"If you don't succeed, you will be the one to send her to an eternity of suffering, in The Land of Shattered Moons."

Fun Fact: The cat that greeted Ashenwater was his great, great grandfather.

A Step Into the Sun

[image]

Hopekit in the Sun

The sky was eggshell blue, the air chillingly still as Hopekit peeked out into the sun for the first time. "Whoa..." A hawk circled high in the sky, stark against the pale atmosphere around it.

Tail still shrouded in the darkness of the cave tunnel, she put one paw forward, sneezing as frosty air entered her nose too fast. Crouching so the hawk wouldn't see her, she crept forward, further and further out from her home, out onto a large ledge overhanging a dizzyingly long drop. *I can see everything!* Hopekit marvelled, her mismatched eyes searching everything she could possibly see. An ice-covered lake, the dark smudge of a burnt-out forest directly below the mountain, flat, open land far in the distance... It was glorious. Beautiful.

"Hopekit!" She jumped, feeling as if she'd been poked with an icicle. *Hawk-dung, it's Mother!* "You're four moons old! Did I tell you you could be out here? It's dangerous!" Gentlebreeze chastised, hurrying her daughter towards the lengthy, dark entrance into the cave at the center of the mountain. Disappointed, she let her paws drag. A prick of anger and impatience flared in her chest at the fact that she'd have to wait for another two moons until she could be free from the stuffy cave. "Sorry." Gentlebreeze sighed, shaking her head wearily. "You'll have plenty of time to be outside when you're older, and when it's warmer. Wait a bit longer, love, okay?" Hopekit nodded, letting her mother usher her into the smothering darkness, that she was so familiar with.

~❄~

"Get Hopekit! She's got the stone!" Jaws aching, Hopekit stumble-ran across the underground camp, heaving a small, smooth stone in her stubby teeth. Kittish excitement rose in her chest as she gained more ground on Bluekit and Emeraldkit, running as if her life

depended on it. "Hopekit! Here, pass!" Screechkit squealed, bouncing up and down in anticipation. But Hopekit hesitated. Screechkit was tiny. He could just barely hold a stick, but a hefty stone like this would be too difficult. *We'll lose!*

But before she could decide, she felt paws collide with her back. Bluekit's scent flooded over her, and she tried to twist herself out of her brother's grasp, all the while keeping the stone tucked beneath her fluffy, cream-coloured belly. She felt it slipping, as another nursery kit on the opposite team, Emeraldkit, tried to fish it out. "Screechkit, grab it!" She called out, sliding the stone away.

His eyes lit up, and he tried to grab the stone but kept dropping it, sending the smooth piece of gray rock clattering to the ground. Hopekit wriggled out of Bluekit's grasp, sprinting to help her little brother. But Emeraldkit got to him first. An only kit with a stunning, unusual pelt, endearing and persuasive, Emeraldkit was a Clan favourite. Combined with the fact that she had survived Greencough, a life-threatening disease, she was a little miracle in everyone's eyes, a moon older than Hopekit. But she was mean to Screechkit, and Hopekit strongly disliked her for that.

He let out a cry as she knocked him away, grabbing the stone. "Yeah! Go, Emeraldkit!" Bluekit cheered, and Hopekit glared at him. "Careful!" As Bluekit passed him, in pursuit of his teammate, she heard him taunt little Screechkit. "Better luck next time, Twiggykit!"

Hurrying to his side, she helped him up. His eyes shone with a thin film of tears, and she felt a pang of unease and pity. He had been born alongside her and Bluekit, but he was always so small. There were two separate times when he had been on the brink of death, and he'd never really recovered. Now, he was the target practice for Emeraldkit. *That spoiled, self-centred bully*.

"You okay?" He nodded, stifling a sniffle. "Yeah, but they won." Hopekit glanced over to the other team of Bluekit and Emeraldkit, seeing them gloating in the place where they were supposed to drop the stone to win. "It's fine. It's just a game. And you're not Twiggykit, you're Screechkit. Don't let her be mean to you, okay? And we weren't going to win anyway." He flicked his tail. "Thanks,

Hopekit. I'm glad you're not like them."

~❄~

Exhaustion swept over Hopekit, as she curled at Gentlebreeze's belly, Screechkit and Bluekit were both asleep next to her, but despite how tired she was, she couldn't sleep. The sensation of hunger dragged at the pits of her stomach, but she was used to it. Ever since she was a tiny kit, hunger had been as familiar as the stone walls of the cave, or her own brothers; it no longer bothered her very much. "Mother?" Gentlebreeze glanced sleepily down at her daughter, golden eyes shining in the dark. "Yes, Hopekit?" She blinked. "Emeraldkit was being mean earlier. She called Screechkit, Twiggykit." She dug her claws into the moss and rabbit pelt of the nest, as Gentlebreeze let out a quiet sigh. "Pay her no attention, my love. She's just..." Her mother hesitated for a moment, struggling to articulate what she was trying to say. "Some cats are just like that. She'll change over time, and she'll become a more reasonable cat; more mature."

"I know. But she's just so awful!"

"Sleep. You're letting your temper flare too high, Hopekit. Focus on other things." Still seething slightly, she sank down, covering her nose with her tail. Cats murmured in the ghostly dusk of the cave, eyes flickering like multicoloured stars under the pale light of the glowing lichen. Too weary to keep her eyes open any longer, she drifted away to sleep.

Hopekit dreamed...

A mountain ridge, dotted with pines, greeted Hopekit in her dream. The snow was soft, and the air was only chilly, not cold. With awe in her eyes, she gazed around the peaceful, still landscape, mouth agape. Then, from behind a drift, a cat padded into view. He was large and thick-furred, with a blueish-gray pelt, and blue eyes. His pelt was speckled with countless stars. Is that... *He dipped his head, eyes warm. "Hello, Hopekit. I'm your father, Ashenwater." Delight bloomed like a flower in her chest. "Really? Hello! It's so great to meet you!" She leaned forward to greet him, but her paw went right through him. He wasn't solid, more like a cloud than a cat.*

"I have a simple message for you. It's random, and won't make sense now, but listen close." Hopekit's ears pricked as he spoke. "Be the best cat you can be, okay? Be kind, and listen to your Clanmates and kin. Be positive."

"Why are you telling me this? I'm only a kit. Did I do something wrong?" Ashenwater chuckled. "Of course not. Just..." A worried look flashed across his face briefly. He looked like he knew something terrible. "I just wanted to meet you. Give you some... Fatherly advice. Goodbye, Hopekit." With that, the great blue tom slipped away, seeming to melt into the landscape of snow. There were so many things she wanted to say and ask him, but she could feel her limbs regaining sense, her mind growing misty as she began to wake up.

Pre-dawn light filtered through the fissures in the ceiling that cats had stuffed with ice long ago, as Hopekit awoke. Cats were just beginning to stir in their nests, and she suspected the dawn patrol would leave soon. Gentlebreeze's flanks rose and fell gently in slumber, Bluekit fidgetted as he dreamed, and Screechkit was curled into a tiny ball of cream tabby fur, but Hopekit was wide-awake. She'd always been an early riser. She thought about her strange dream. *What does it mean? Why did he visit me, and not Mother or Bluekit, or Screechkit?* Questions drifted through her head like snowflakes on a gale. *I'll try to do what he said.* She decided with a yawn. *I'll be a good kit and a good apprentice, and someday, a good warrior.*

What do you guys think? PLEASE give me any constructive criticism, I want to make this book as good as it possibly can be. Feel free to predict where you think this book will go!

Oh, also, do you guys prefer longer chapters, (1200+) or shorter ones? (900-1000+)

Fun Fact: Hopekit has Heterochromia! That means she has one golden, and one amber eye.

The Start of Apprenticeship

[image]

Hopekit/Paw! Base by Louixie!

Excitement sparked through Hopekit, as she stood at the edge of the cliff, Bluekit and Screechkit by her side. Adderstar loomed tall in front of her, and the first hints of Snowmelt season were apparent in the soft green of the moors and forests behind them, and in the melting lake in the distance. High-altitude flowers and lichens grew from cracks in the rocks further down the mountain, or so she had been told.

She glanced at Screechkit, who looked overjoyed, and Bluekit who kept looking at Emeraldpaw. She'd received her name a moon prior and was always boasting about it.

Hopekit was jerked out of her thoughts as the last cat sat down, and Adderstar commenced the ceremony. "Bluekit, step forward, please." He did, and Adderstar placed his large, black paw on his shoulder. Bluekit wobbled slightly under the weight of his paw but then stayed standing and steady. She saw satisfaction light in Adderstar's ice-blue eyes. "Until you are worthy of your warrior name, you shall be known as Bluepaw. The cat I believe will train you best is Pinestalk." Pinestalk padded up beside his apprentice, towering above the younger cat. He was heavyset and muscular, a great fighter. *Lucky Bluepaw. I would have liked Pinestalk as a mentor.*

"Screechkit, step forward please." Screechkit exchanged a nervous glance with Hopekit, before slowly stepping toward the huge tom. He only lightly laid a paw on his willowy shoulder, obviously aware that full weight would knock over the small tom. "Until you are worthy of your warrior name, you shall be known as Screechpaw. I believe that-" Screechpaw raised his tail, and almost shaking with nerves, he squeaked out: "Adderstar, I would like to become a medicine cat if that's okay with you and Frostedmoss."

Adderstar blinked with surprise. "Why didn't you say something

earlier? Of course. Frostedmoss?" The skinny gray-and-white patched tom looked ecstatic. "This is great! I've been needing an apprentice for moons. I'd be glad to train Screechpaw." Screechpaw grinned stepping up beside his new mentor. "Screechpaw, you have chosen the path of a medicine cat, a healer and messenger for our holy ancestors in The Land of Shining Stars. Your mentor and guide will be Frostedmoss."

Screechpaw leaped down beside Hopekit, his golden eyes glowing. "I'm a medicine cat apprentice!"

"That's amazing! You'll be a great medicine cat."

"I hope so! Now I don't have to train with Emeraldpaw." He shot a look at Bluepaw and Emeraldpaw, who were chatting a bit too close together near the mouth of the cave. "Yeah, I-" Before she could finish her sentence, Adderstar called her up.

"Hopekit, step forward please." Stomach feeling as if it had a hawk flapping around it, she hurried up to Adderstar, heart hammering. He placed a paw on her shoulder, and she nearly fell over but tried as hard as she possibly could to remain upright. "Until you are worthy of your warrior name, you shall be known as Hopepaw. The cat I believe will train you best is..." He hesitated for a moment, eyes flitting between two cats. A small, short-furred, skittish young warrior named Tumblesoar, and a strong, highly respected she-cat named Darkdaisy. *Please, please give me Darkdaisy...*

"...Is Tumblesoar." Hopepaw's heart dropped. She knew why Adderstar had chosen the cli warrior, barely twenty moons old. He was her father, Ashenfall's, half-brother. They even looked a bit similar, with a blue tint to their pelts. But except for being not-so-distantly related, they had nothing in common. He was not good mentor material, and Hopepaw was sure she would end up teaching herself. *There are even rumours that he's part MeadowClan!*

He excitedly bounded up to the edge of the cliff, barely looking at Hopepaw. Cats began to call out the new apprentices' names, and they rang, echoing and clear over the mountains. But the cat calling the loudest was Gentlebreeze, eyes shimmering with a film of tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks.

Disappointed, but excited at the same time, she went to congratulate Screechkit- no, Screechpaw, and Bluepaw. But she was quickly intercepted by Tumblesoar. "Hi! I'm your mentor now. It's a pleasure to meet- er train you. Well, I've met you, so-" He nervously scrambled for words, and Hopepaw sighed inwardly. *Amazing. This is off to a great start.* "...Anyways! Time for the tour of the territory."

"Wait, can I go talk to my mother first?"

"Sure. Just don't be long." She turned and slipped through the thick crowd of gathered, chatting cats, bumping into several Clanmates, including an intimidating young warrior named Beartooth, uttering a rushed apology before finding her way to Gentlebreeze's side. "Hello, mother-" She was cut off as Gentlebreeze wrapped her paws around her daughter. "I'm proud of you, Hopepaw. You looked so grown up on that cliff, so much like Ashenwater," Her voice broke slightly, and she paused, dabbing her eyes with a fluffy gray-and-cream paw. "Defiant, strong, capable. He'd be so proud." She smiled through the tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm being too emotional. Run along, and go take your tour! I want to hear all about it later."

"Okay-" Without so much as another word, she was jostled back toward where Tumblesoar was standing. "Okay, I'm ready. Are we going to take it with Bluepaw and Screechpaw?" He shook his head. "Nope. Screechpaw is a medicine cat apprentice, so he gets a slightly different tour. And Pinestalk already took Bluepaw out, he wanted to show him the highest peak."

He turned and started to pad down the side path that lead further down the mountain, stumbling on rocks all the way. Forcing a smile onto her muzzle, she followed her new mentor down into the lower parts of BleakClan territory.

~❄~

"... And this is the creek! It runs through part of our territory, EmberClan's territory, and out to the lake. We don't usually fish here, we use the Frosted Pool, a short walk away from the camp. It's super deep, and there's fish there for the warmer parts of the seasons!" Tumblesoar rambled on and on about small landmarks, everything from creeks to specific bushes.

"This is an Antlerberry bush. We don't ever touch Antlerberries, they're incredibly toxic. Like, they can kill a full-grown warrior in minutes." Despite her better judgment, Hopepaw craned her neck forward to sniff the tiny, pale yellow blooms on the spiky branches. Their scent was sickly sweet and intoxicating. With a gasp, Tumblesoar grabbed her ginger-tipped tail in his jaws, tugging her backward. "Careful!"

"They're *flowers.* Are the flowers poisonous too?"

"Yes! Well... Uh, ask Frostedmoss, okay? I'm not totally sure."

"Then, why'd you freak out? I was just seeing what they smelled like."

"It's your first day as an apprentice! I don't want to have to drag you, foaming at the mouth, up the mountain. Come on, let's go." He briskly lead her away from the bush, and she grumpily followed, the scent of Antlerberry blossoms still stuck like honey in her nose, coating the back of her throat, making her head feel slightly thick.

She bent to drink from a puddle, squishing her paw pads into the soft cover of grass that grew below them. She liked it down near the base of the mountains. It was so different from the stark grays and whites of the high peaks, and it seemed alive with prey and life, flowers and light. It was a lot warmer too, so warm in fact, that she was almost too hot, in her thick cream-and-ginger fur. The only thing she didn't like was EmberClan's sootlike, acrid scent that drifted from their border through a copse of tall, pale silvery trees. "Hurry up, Hopepaw! We're going to go visit the Rock Tumble." Licking a droplet of water from below her nose, she bounded toward her mentor's voice.

~❁~

Exhausted, Hopepaw limped down the tunnel into the cave. She was plunged into darkness, too far away from the glowing lichen of the cave to see its ghostly glow, and too far away from the light of the sinking sun to have it illuminate her path.

All day had been spent outdoors, and she'd had a run-in with some

shard shards of slate at the Rock Tumble that tore up her pads, leaving them bruised and bloodied. *I'm pretty sure I still have a piece of that dumb rock in my left paw.* Most BleakClan cats had thick, nearly impenetrable paw pads, but hers were soft and smooth. Gentlebreeze and Frostedmoss assured her that some cats' just took time to thicken, but she wasn't so sure.

As she finally entered the comforting warmth of the cave, Screechpaw bounced over to his sister. "I learned so much! Frostedmoss is such a great mentor. How was your day, Hopepaw?" She smiled through gritted teeth. "It was great! I got to see everything."

Screechpaw's ears suddenly pricked up. "Wait here!" She waited, watching cats pick from the fresh-kill hole, belly rumbling. He raced back, holding a collection of small, battered leaves. "Look!" Hopepaw stared at them, trying to decipher what they were. "Nice leaves!" He purred with laughter. "Not just leaves. They're dock, nettle and comfrey!" He looked so excited, that she just smiled, although she had no clue what they did. "Awesome, Screechpaw. I'm going to go eat." He nodded, and she picked out a large mouse, settling down to eat it, not before getting Frostedmoss to put some soothing herbs on her paw pads.

Tired enough to fall asleep with food in her mouth, she quickly ate and found a nest in the Apprentice cave, likely made by Emeraldpaw, or warriors or elders that had nothing else to do. The nest was a bit large and kind of prickly, and she shifted to get comfortable. *I'll get some feathers and my own rabbit pelt tomorrow.* Mind hazy with exhaustion, she slipped into a dreamless sleep.

Fun Fact: Each cat has a rabbit pelt, usually a white rabbit pelt, in their nest for warmth and comfort. Cats also often share nests in the Snowfall season.

Missed Prey, and Mentor Trouble

[image]

Screechpaw! Base by Louixie

Hopepaw stalked up on a hare, paw steps as light as feathers. Her soft paw pads made it so that she made no sound on the thick, damp snow, and she was close enough that she could see its nose twitching, round face covered in brown fur, speckled in the last shedding hairs of white.

With a deep breath, she sprang, catching her prey in her claws, and rolling as it squealed and tried desperately to shake its attacker off. Trying to rake its throat failed, and she felt herself losing the fight. As suddenly as it had started, the struggle was over. The rabbit kicked out hard with its hind paws, striking Hopepaw hard on the muzzle. With a gasp of pain, she tumbled into the snow, blood trickling from her nose.

Tumblesoar hurried over, tail twitching. "Well, an attempt was made. The attempt failed, but all that matters is that you tried." He meowed dryly. "Are you okay?" Nose smarting and eyes watering, she rubbed the blood off of her fur. "That stupid hare." Tumblesoar shrugged. "You had good coordination, at least." Hopepaw's eyes narrowed, a fowl mood settling over her like a dark cloud. "I had the coordination of a dying, senile hawk. I hate hunting."

Her mentor sighed. "We'll try fishing later. Let's go get something for that nose."

"I don't need anything for my-"

"Come on. Back to camp." Drying blood staining her cream fur a daunting shade of crimson, she began the long trek back to camp.

~❄~

Cats stared at Hopepaw as she stepped into the underground camp, making a beeline for the Medicine cave. Only Screechpaw was there, Frostedmoss had gone herb-hunting at dawn and left him in charge. It was his first time being left without his mentor, and he was proud but nervous.

As she padded deeper into the small hole in the wall of the main cave, glowing lichen brushed her back, its pale glow making Screechpaw's golden eyes gleam as he turned to face her, mouth quirking into a smile before his face fell when he saw the blood. "Hello, Hopepaw! Whoa, you're covered in blood!" He rushed over and began tilting her muzzle back and forth to try and see what had happened to cause the bleeding. "Did something hit your nose?" She nodded. "Yeah. A dumb hare kicked me." He tipped his head sympathetically. "How badly does it hurt?"

"Not too bad. Just a bit sore." She answered. He looked thoughtful for a moment. "I don't think I have anything to give you. Just clean the mess off with a piece of wet moss, and you're good to go! I can give you a poppy seed later if it hurts too bad to sleep." Hopepaw smiled gratefully, before turning from the den. "See you later, Screechpaw!" Screechpaw waved his tabby paw after her, and she returned to the main area of the camp.

There, she spied Bluepaw sitting beside Emeraldpaw. Immediately, she narrowed her eyes. *I can't understand what he sees in her. She's such a rude, snooty cat! Am I the only one who sees that?* Hopepaw thought, annoyed. *She has him wrapped around her paw. All she has to do is blink those big green eyes, and he'll do anything.* Bluepaw glanced at her and turned back to his conversation. They had barely talked in the almost two moons they'd been apprentices.

~❄~

Hopepaw dipped her paw into the stream, attempting to hook the small, silvery fish from the swiftly flowing creek. Tumblesoar hovered over her shoulder, giving out instructions that made no sense. "Put your paw down *slowly*, like you're going to pet the fish."

"It's not going to sit there and let me pet it. I have to strike fast."

"Try!"

"Do you want me to lose it? I'm trying to catch it, not make friends with it!" Fed up, she jerked her soaking paw out of the chilly creek and flicked it to rid it of the droplets of water. "Have you ever even fished before?" She questioned him. "Yes, of course, I have!" He snapped defensively. Hopepaw quirked her brow. "That's odd because you seem to know close to nothing about it."

Tumblesoar's pale green eyes smouldered with rising anger, and his long, snakelike tail lashed over the stones beside the river. "That's *it*. All I've done for nearly two moons is try to teach you, and you never appreciate it!" He let out a sigh. "I don't know *why* Adderstar gave me an apprentice. But I've been trying my best, okay?" Hopepaw began to feel a bit guilty, and she lowered her head. "For the rest of the day and tomorrow, you'll do chores around camp. That should teach you some manners."

"But-"

"No buts. None. Back to camp."

Her head was a mix of emotions. Anger that she had been confined to camp, guilt that she had been so rude to Tumblesoar, disappointment that she hadn't caught anything that day, and more that she couldn't pick out. With one last flick of her bushy tail, she stalked off through the trees, the rustling of flower-filled grass and leaves the only sound as she disappeared.

~❁~

Hopepaw picked a vole and a hare out of the prey hole and dragged them to the Elder's den. There, Elkantler, Harepad and Stumpshadow, the Clan's three elders crouched in the dim space, comfortably cushioned by layers of moss and hare pelts.

Harepad was the oldest, completely blind and half-deaf. Her fur was brittle and faded, its gray patches fading to a white that matched the rest of her pelt. Stumpshadow was Harepad's mate, and in better health, being a few moons younger, although his dark-ginger pelt was fading like his partner's. Elkantler was still quite young but had

been forced to retire when three of his four paws had been frostbitten so badly, that it hurt for him to walk. He was bitter because of that, and not very friendly to anyone.

When she had dropped off the fresh-kill for the two elderly- and one not-so-elderly- cats and tried to leave, Harepad stopped her. "You're Hopepaw, right? Gentlebreeze and Ashenwater's daughter?" Hopepaw nodded. "Yes, I am. Why?" Harepad let out a raspy purr. "Just checkin'. My eyes aren't as good as they used to be." *Yeah, you're completely, black-out blind.* "Could you describe yourself to me? I like having mental pictures of all my Clanmates. "Uh... Sure. I'm cream-coloured, with a ginger stripe down my back, a few ginger paws, ginger ears and speckles around my nose... I've got one amber eye, and one golden eye..." She paused and looked down at herself. "And I have short legs and fluffy fur."

Harepad nodded. "I see. Well, I don't see, but you know what I mean." Hopepaw smiled. *I like this cat.* "Tell your brother to come to me sometime. I want to know what he looks like."

"Which brother? I have two."

"The... other one, Bluepaw. I already talked to Screechpaw."

"Will do. Enjoy your food, Harepad. You too, Stumpshadow, Elkantler." Stumpshadow nodded in her direction and Elkantler just grunted.

In the main camp area, cats milled around, eating, sharing tongues or chatting amongst themselves. The pink-tinted light streaming dimly through the ice-stuffed cracks in the stone ceiling told her that it was dusk, and she went to go find something to eat for herself. There, a wood pigeon lay splayed in the stone divet, and her mouth watered. Hopepaw had a taste for birds, but besides hawks, they rarely showed up unless a patrol was sent down to the base of the mountain. Glancing around, she saw that all of the other cats had eaten or were currently eating, so she grabbed onto the pigeon to haul it to the Apprentice den.

But as soon as she sank her fangs into a feathery wing, a gray-blue paw slammed down on the breast of the plump bird. Looking up,

she saw Bluepaw. His mentor was training him vigorously, and he had grown large and athletic, much larger than his sister. "I had that first, Bluepaw. I'm hungry." She tugged forcefully at the wing, but Bluepaw had a concrete hold on it with his claws. "Emeraldpaw and I want this. It's too big for you to eat alone, pick something smaller." Hopepaw's eyes narrowed. "I can eat more than you think. You and Emeraldpaw pick something else! I had it first, it's only fair."

"Bluepaw's tail flicked back and forth across the stone. "You didn't bring anything back for the Clan, you shouldn't have such a good piece of prey." Ready to go off on her brother, Hopepaw arched her back and hissed at him. A growl thundered low in his chest, and he crouched, ready to spring.

"Hey! Stop, you two!" Gentlebreeze frantically stepped between her kits, gaze switching from Hopepaw to Bluepaw. "Share it." She meowed firmly, eyes glittering with panic. She split the bird and gave some to each apprentice. "Don't either of you ever think about attacking each other ever again." With that, she padded away. Fury and indignance still smouldering like the barely-quelled embers of a fire, she glared once more at Bluepaw and returned to her nest.

Fun Fact: Screechkit got his name, because when he was a tiny kit, his mew sounded very shrill and loud, like the call of a hawk or eagle. Bluekit received his because of his pelt, and Hopekit for being a pinprick of hope in a dark time for her parents, and the rest of the Clan.

Frustration and Sibling Disputes

[image]

Bluepaw! Base by Louixie.

Bored out of her mind, Hopepaw crouched in the shadows of the den, watching her Clanmates as they were sent out or returned from patrols, spent time with their mates, friends or kin, or napped in their nests. Nests Hopepaw had cleaned and refreshed.

Darkdaisy, the cat that could have been her mentor, sat side-by-side with her mate, Wolfwhisper. Emeraldpaw's mother, Brookspirit visited Frostedmoss for some herbs to treat her cough, and the elders slept like they usually did. The rest of the Clan, even her own mentor, were out in the sun, enjoying the late Snowmelt day. She longed to join them, but couldn't. She'd been confined to camp.

There aren't even any more chores to do! She complained to herself, irritated. *This is stupid. I could be learning how to hunt better, but instead, I'm stuck in here.* She slid her claws in and out on the moss of her nest, halfheartedly searching it for twigs or thorns. Then, a thought struck her. *What if I sneak out? There aren't any guards. There's nobody watching, and if they do see, they'll think I'm visiting the Dirtpatch. I'll go, hunt something big, come back and show everyone, even Tumblesoar and Bluepaw, that I'm competent.*

Thrilled at the idea of evading her Clan, she cautiously crept out of her den and slipped inconspicuously through the shadows. She tried her best to remain as she headed towards the tunnel and quickly ascended it, emerging into the near-blinding light of midday.

BleakClan cats' eyes were especially used to both stark darkness and the bright white light that bounced off of snow, into unsuspecting eyes. Cats could go blind from the snow light, and she blinked rapidly, just to be safe.

Surveying the mountains, she saw a distant patrol, trekking along a rocky ridge. She couldn't see to the bottom of the mountains, but she knew that if she kept to the bushes and stayed low, she could blend in and stay hidden. Taking one last glance at the cave, she fled down into the smudge of green that was the forest.

~❁~

Birds sang in the trees as Hopepaw padded through carpets of soft clover, new leaves rustling gently above her head. Some clouds had covered the sky, making everything dim under the trees, but she didn't mind. It was still quite peaceful.

Searching through the underbrush, she came across the scent of a squirrel. She'd only smelled it once or twice but knew it well enough to recognize the russet-furred animals. As she passed through a blackberry bramble, Hopepaw had to grit her teeth as thorns assaulted her pelt, catching and tearing out her soft fur. "Hawk-dung," She muttered, stumbling free from the hold of the spiky branches. "Stupid brambles." But her mood improved, and her ears pricked as she saw her desired prey, the squirrel, sitting below a large oak tree.

Barely daring to breathe, she kept as low as she could and stalked forward. *Easy. It's not even looking at me! Simple as-* Suddenly, a black and white blur shot out of the grass, striking the squirrel before it could even cry out. Breathing hard, the cat turned to look at her. Emeraldpaw. "Hopepaw? What are *you* doing out here?" She didn't even sound surprised, just annoyed, her words laced with venom.

"That was my prey!" Hopepaw protested, tail lashing and ears pinned back onto her head. "No, I was already tracking it. Bluepaw will say the same thing if you ask him. Bluepaw?" As if attached to her paw with a vine, on command, Bluepaw padded out of the same grass that Emeraldpaw had appeared from. "Yeah, she'd been following it for a while. It's her prey. And why are you even out here? You're confined to the camp."

"That- None of your business, Bluepaw! "

"It is my business. You're my sister, and you shouldn't be out here." Hopepaw narrowed her eyes. The bitterness she'd been feeling for the last few moons poured out of her, in a wave of hate.

"Huh, so now you pay attention to what I do? Now you acknowledge that I'm your sister? Because lately, you're closer to her, than you are to me!" She spat, furious. "What?! I'm allowed to have friends, Hopepaw! What's wrong with you? "

"Nothing's wrong with me. But there's obviously something wrong with *you*! What do you see in her?"

"I- You have *no right* to say who I am and who I'm not interested in! Emeraldpaw is a *wonderful* cat. Better than you'll *ever* be." Emeraldpaw, who had sat silently watching the fight between the two siblings stood up. "Come on, Bluepaw." She coaxed coldly. "She's not worth our time." She snatched up the squirrel and padded away with the tall blue tom by her side.

With hot, angry tears burning her eyes, Hopepaw turned around and marched away from the two wretched cats she had just interacted with. She felt as if she had ice and hot coals in her stomach at the same time. Anger and dread swirling around in one dark cloud of despair. Anger that Emeraldpaw would dare to take her brother, and her prey, and insult her too. And dread that she would lose Bluepaw, no matter how much she hated him at the moment, forever to the awful cat he called his friend.

~❄~

"What were you thinking, Hopepaw? I told you to stay in camp! Can't you listen to *anything*?!" Tumblesoar ranted his fury as Hopepaw shrank down in front of him, barely listening to a word he said. Thorns still covered her pelt, melted snow plastered her belly and leg fur to her skin, and she hadn't managed to catch anything more than a small, skinny vole. "Sorry." She muttered, staring at her paws. *Not sorry.*

"If you had just *told* me you wanted to hunt, maybe I would have taken you on patrol with me! But you ruined that by going behind my back, getting into a screaming match with your brother, and

getting torn up by brambles." He took a deep breath in, and let it out in a tired sigh. "Just... Just go to your nest. I'll decide what your punishment is in the morning when we've both calmed down."

Most of the Clan stared at the angry exchange between mentor and apprentice, and she caught sight of Gentlebreeze off by the nursery, eyes filled to the brim with sadness and disappointment. She quickly looked away, not able to bear seeing her mother look so distraught because of her actions. Hopepaw veered away from the crowds of cats and headed for the Medicine den.

"Screechpaw?" She whispered, ducking under the feathery tendrils of lichen. Frostedmoss and Screechpaw were sorting herbs together, and the senior medicine cat lifted his head, giving a welcoming nod to the newcomer. "Can I help you, Hopepaw?" Hopepaw tipped her head. "Can I have something for some thorn scratches, please?"

Frostedmoss nodded and stood up, heading to the battered apprentice to look her over. He took some lichen in one patched gray paw and used it to light his way around her fur, searching for deeper wounds. Eyes lit up by the blueish-silver glow, he pulled away and turned to Screechpaw, who had been watching with a worried expression. "Fetch comfrey root, and a bit of dock."

Screechpaw dutifully dipped his small paws into several small dips in the ground, covered by leaves, and retrieved the herbs. He passed them to his mentor, who began applying them to the numerous scratches. "This might sting a bit," He warned, and Hopepaw gritted her teeth against the pinpricks of pain, caused by the dock. "Come back if they get inflamed or hot to the touch. Other than that, you're fine! Luckily, I don't think they'll scar. And the fur you lost will grow back in- at the most- a moon."

With a small, grateful smile, she thanked Frostedmoss. He shrugged her thanks off and padded into the main cave area to find something to eat. That left just Screechpaw. "What happened today?" He queried, eyes shimmering with anxiety. "I heard that you yelled at Bluepaw and Emeraldpaw. What did they do?" *Gossip travels fast, I see.*

"Emeraldpaw took my prey. I... snuck out and tried to hunt

something big to show Tumblesoar that I could. I was so bored! But she came out of nowhere and attacked the squirrel I was tracking. She makes me *so mad*, and she has Bluepaw totally under her control! I confronted him, and he told me that she was a better cat than I'd ever be... I want to be his friend like we were when we were just little kits. But that stuck-up excuse of a cat is making it *really* hard."

Screechpaw tipped his head sympathetically. "Just try to be kind to both of them. It'll get better!" Hopepaw's mind jumped back to when she was a kit, and her mother had told her the same thing. And to the dream she'd had moons ago, where her father had insisted she be civil and kind. *I've failed that badly.* "Thanks, Screechpaw. I'll... I'll try." Touching her nose to his ear, she slipped out of the den.

A Malicious Couple

[image]

Tumblesoar above! Base by Louixie

The dawn wind shrieked, weaving its way through stone and snow, and into Hopepaw's fur as she trekked the rocky ridge above the camp. In front of her, three more cats padded steadily along. Bluepaw, Pinestalk and Tumblesoar.

She shivered as another gust buffeted her stubby frame, and she couldn't help but gaze longingly down at the green forest far below. Snowgone season had come, but up on the mountains, it was still cold. The wind and the early hour only added to the bitterness of the cold.

"Wouldn't it be more helpful to hunt down there, and not freeze our tails off up here? There's plenty of prey in the forest." She grumbled, gasping as the stones under her paws shifted. "We're patrolling the border." Pinestalk rumbled, bushy ginger-and-gray speckled tail swishing stripes into the thin layer of snow. "For what? There's no cat alive, dumb enough to trek through moons of icy mountains to reach one measly camp." Hopepaw retorted, still grumpy from being woken up at the break of dawn for the patrol.

Tumblesoar turned his head and gave the apprentice a hard stare. "And I didn't think there'd be any apprentice dumb enough to talk back to a senior warrior." He hissed, obviously at the end of his patience. She opened her mouth to give a stinging reply but then decided against it. It was too early to be in trouble already. Bluepaw glanced back at her and curled his lip into a nasty, sneer-like smile. She sneered right back and continued to walk.

~❄~

When the last border had been marked, the sun was high in the sky. Weary and sore, she headed straight for the fresh-kill hole and found something to eat. Luckily, a hunting patrol had just returned,

laden with Snowgone-plump prey. Even a hawk, fierce and difficult prey lay on top of it all, dark tawny feathers ruffled from the scuffle. But she left the hawk, instead choosing a small, silver-coloured fish.

She'd only had fish once, and it had been quite literally writhing of a type of small, thin white worm. As a result of the worms, the fish tasted rancid. Warily, she took a bite, relaxing when she didn't find any trace of the worms. In fact, the fish tasted amazing, like fresh water, and she devoured it. *Those RippleClan cats have it figured out...*

While enjoying her food, she heard Tumblesoar pad up behind her. "Once you're done eating, we'll do a quick battle training session. After that, you have the rest of the afternoon off, to rest. Tonight is the night of the gathering." Hopepaw's eyes went wide. "The gathering? I didn't realize it was tonight!" Her mentor nodded, blue tabby tail twitching. "You're lucky I'm letting you come after talking back to Pinestalk." *Isn't that how a conversation works?* "Thanks, Tumblesoar." He dipped his head and padded away, to wait by the entrance to the tunnel.

Finishing the last of her fish, she quickly cleaned the scales from her whiskers and hurried over to the lanky tom. "Where are we training? And with who?" Without looking back, he simply replied: "You're going to be fighting me today, at the Rock Tumble. You've been an apprentice for four moons, so I think you have a chance." He announced, before quirking an eyebrow teasingly. "Even if you do have short legs."

"Try me, if you're so tough. Snake-tail."

"I never said you'd beat me. I'm a trained warrior."

"Well, you implied it." Purposely walking faster to outpace her mentor, she headed for the Rock Tumble. *Maybe he's not as bad as I thought.*

~❁~

"Okay, we're working on ambush fighting for the moment. I'll give you a few seconds to hide. You have to catch me off-guard and hold

me down for at least three seconds. Ready?" Hopepaw nodded, bristling with excitement. She liked fighting and training better than hunting, so any day was a good day when she got to skip out on her least favourite activity.

"Go!" Hopepaw glanced wildly around at the Rock Tumble. Small shrubs sprung from the cascade of stone and the sky was a clear blue, covered in fluffy, slow-moving clouds. Her mismatched gaze landed on a crevice between two rocks, higher on the slope. *If he passes below me, I can leap onto him.* She thought, carefully scaling the incline, and fluidly slipping into her newfound hiding place.

She crouched, tense in her spot, waiting for Tumblesoar to start looking for her. When he lifted his head and started searching, Hopepaw was delighted to see that he wasn't even looking in her general direction. Fangs bared, she began to slide out of the gap, posed to leap. His left back paw half-collapsed under him as he stepped carelessly across a small scattering of slate, and he hissed, looking down.

Seeing her perfect chance, she launched into the air, striking her mentor to the rocky ground. He let out a cry of shock, twisting to try and rid his pelt of the undersized apprentice. At one point, he got one paw on her head, the other on her shoulder, and nearly forced her down, almost winning the fight. But she wrapped one fluffy ginger-and-cream limb around his neck, claws sliding out before swiftly retracting again. The other, she planted between his skinny shoulder blades, knocking him down, and holding him there.

Panting, eyes wild and bright with the adrenaline of battle, she sat down, triumphantly flicking her tail. "Who are you calling Short Legs now?"

"Still you," He wheezed, getting to his paws. "But I'm impressed, Hopepaw. That was very smart, using height to your advantage." She smiled at his words, and he gave her a swift nod. "Obviously, your fighting skills are better than your hunting skills. Some cats are just like that. Let's go back to camp, and you can rest." Proud she had won a fight against her mentor, she let a good mood overtake her. For the first time in her apprenticeship, she actually

felt like it was going well and was even kind of fun.

~❄~

Hopepaw was attempting to nap in her nest when she heard a trio of voices rise over the soft murmur of the rest of the Clan, who were all excited about the gathering. Bluepaw, Screechpaw and Emeraldpaw. Bluepaw's voice had developed a bit of a rough quality and was easy to pick out from Emeraldpaw's smooth, soft mew, and Screechpaw's higher call.

Screechpaw sounded upset, and his voice was rising in pitch by the second. "I'm going to tell Adderstar what you did!" He cried, and Hopepaw hastily opened one eye. "No, you won't, you little twerp. You tell anyone anything and you're going to have a nice trip down the mountain backwards." Now, she was wide awake, listening with every bit of her consciousness. "You stole from EmberClan, Bluepaw! Are you so feather-brained, that you think they won't bring it up at the Gathering tonight? You left your stink all over their land!"

Bluepaw scoffed. "They won't notice. It's one measly squirrel. Don't be so paranoid." Emeraldpaw's voice broke in beside his. "Yeah, and it was delicious," She taunted, tail flicking as Hopepaw made her way to the entrance of the Apprentice den. "Why don't you try some?" Emeraldpaw's eyes held a malicious light, as she produced some russet fur from under her claws, and between her paw pads. Bluepaw did the same, before grabbing the small cream tabby tom by the scruff, forcing his nose into the small pile of fur. Hopepaw rushed forward, but before she could stop them, they rubbed the squirrel's scent all over his fur.

"What's wrong with you?!" She snarled, pulling Screechpaw behind her, and into the Apprentice den, where he cowered, shaking. "You're sick! Bluepaw, how could you bully your own brother? And Emeraldpaw- I swear on the Land of Shining Stars, there is something wrong with you. Get away from us, before I report the both of you!" Chest heaving, nearly seeing red, she gave Bluepaw a hard shove and turned back toward Screechpaw. His golden eyes were wide and full of terror, and he rushed to Hopepaw, burying his muzzle in her fur.

"They stole from EmberClan?" She asked him gently, looking for confirmation from her brother. He nodded. "I- I was out looking for herbs, and I saw them. I followed them back to camp, and then..." He sniffed and pulled away from her. "I'm scared, Hopepaw. I'm worried they'll do something to me." Hopepaw felt a surge of pity rush over her, and she sighed. "If they try anything, go to Mother, or me. Or Adderstar. You'll be safe as long as you're with them, or me. I promise." He gazed at her, eyes still shimmering with tears. "Okay. You promise?"

"Yes. I-" She was cut off by Adderstar's commanding yowl. "BleakClan, gather at the top of the tunnel! We're leaving for the Gathering." Excitement tingled through her, rising up above and breaking up her anger and fear, and she pulled Screechpaw with her, toward where the rest of the Clan was streaming up the tunnel. "Let's go! It's time for the Gathering

Fun Fact: In these Clans, Gathering only happens once every five moons and Medicine cat meetings happen every three moons. Everyone attends the Gathering, unless not physically able to. (Extremely sick, heavy with kits/caring for a new litter, etc)

A Gathering Gone Wrong

[image]

The four leaders of the Clans, (Left to Right), Quailstar of MeadowClan, Flickerstar of EmberClan, Ospreystar of RippleClan and Adderstar of BleakClan. Art by me!

Night air flowed through Hopepaw's fur like water as she raced alongside her Clanmates, keen to reach the Sacred Willow. It was the meeting place for the Clans, a giant, ancient willow, surrounded with large, pearly-white stones, where each leader sat to talk.

A path had been established through the territories, where cats could travel to the Sacred Willow, a neutral area where you could walk without fear of being attacked. Hopepaw's chest ached with the strain of running- BleakClan cats were not built for speed- but she managed to keep her pace, side-by-side with Tumblesoar and Screechpaw.

As she weaved through large, old trees, marked with burns and scorch marks, she realized that EmberClan's territory was very close. A pang of dread thudded in her chest as she remembered Bluepaw and Emeraldpaw's theft. She glanced back and saw the two apprentices, running near the back of the group.

Suddenly, Adderstar slowed to a halt at the front, stopping the Clan fast behind him. Excited, but a bit nervous to see the other Clans, enjoy gossip and meet new cats, she quickly slicked down her wild fur and stood as tall as she could beside her mentor. Screechpaw was pressed close to Frostedmoss, eyes wide. Adderstar beaconed his Clanmates with a flick of his black-tipped tail, and they began to pad through the last trees.

As they were walking into the small clearing that held the Sacred Willow, Tumblesoar bent down and whispered in her ear. "Don't do anything stupid. Don't fight, don't share secrets, and please, for The Stars' sake, be civil." Hopepaw nodded, and the Willow came into view. Instantly, her jaw dropped open, as she struggled to take in

everything. Pelts mixed with pelts, eyes of all different colours and sizes flashed in the moonlight, and the scents of four different Clans filled the air, heavy as early-morning fog, as cats milled around everywhere.

For the first time, she felt almost...shy to greet so many different cats. But the Clan was already streaming down into the clearing, and she had to follow. Hastily, she glanced around, seeing a large group of apprentices conversing near a stump, and heading in their direction.

A sleek, tall tortoiseshell cat with a white belly sat closest to the stump. They had the build of a she-cat, but the voice of a tom, and Hopepaw was slightly confused. She thought they might be a MeadowClan cat, judging by their thin fur and long limbs.

Two she-cats, probably siblings standing in a clump of ferns, with thick, glossy fur laughed at something the tortoiseshell feline said. One was a black and white tabby, and one was black, covered in white rosettes. She reminded her of Emeraldpaw. *Perhaps RippleClan cats?*

Further into the shadows, a tom and a she-cat, both looking like they could be warriors, crouched low to the ground. The tom, a beast of a cat with long charcoal and black fur gave her a hard stare with cold, aqua eyes. The fiery ginger she-cat at his side clung to him-not in a romantic way, more of a clingy way- her snubbed muzzle displaying a scowl. Disturbed by his intense gaze, she looked away and quietly greeted the tortoiseshell cat. "Hi!" They called back, with a broad smile. "I'm Fallenpaw! I'm from MeadowClan. What's your name?"

"...Hopepaw. I'm from BleakClan."

"Cool! That's Swanpaw and Shiverpaw from RippleClan," *Knew it.* "And over there in the shadows is Rubypaw and Obsidianpaw, from EmberClan." He gave a wary look at the two apprentices, shrouded in darkness. "Between you and me, they scare me a bit." Hopepaw smiled in agreement, while Shiverpaw looked her over. "I just *love* your eyes! They're so cool."

"Thanks! Yours are nice too." She started to feel more comfortable with the five apprentices and found that all except the two EmberClan cats, were kind and friendly. "Oh! I should have mentioned this earlier, but I'm a tom and a she-cat at the same time." Fallenpaw confessed. "Guess I got the best of both worlds." Seeing Hopepaw's confused look, they continued. "I was born with the body parts of a tom and a she-cat. It's strange, but it doesn't bother me! I like to think of myself as a tom." He finished, flicking his tail good-naturedly.

Fascinated, Hopepaw struggled for words for a moment. "That's really cool! I never knew that could... Well, happen." She was about to say something more when the commanding yowl of a cat rang out. Her head jerked towards where the leaders sat, silhouetted by the moonlight, statue-like under the branches of the willow. The quartz slabs under their paws seemed to glow, and she was instantly paying attention.

She could pick out Adderstar, with his broad shoulders and black-and-white fur, sat on the far left stone. Beside him, RippleClan's leader Ospreystar, stood tall. Her silver-and-white fur shone as bright as the moon, and her large aqua-blue eyes surveyed the gathered cats. There was EmberClan's leader, Flickerstar, his powerful muscles rippling under ginger-flecked black fur, but she couldn't remember the name of MeadowClan's leader. She sat on the far right, chestnut fur speckled in star-like white dots, her stumpy tail flicking gently, too short to dangle in the water.

"What's your leader's name?" She whispered to Fallenpaw, trying to be as quiet as possible. He was less quiet, as he replied: "Oh, that's Quailstar. She used to be a loner, you know. Her mother, Spotted... Spotted-Something-Or-Other belonged to a different Clan, called SkyClan! Way, way far away, there are five more Clans in total. But it would take so long to reach them, no one has ever even tried." *What happened to not sharing Clan secrets?*

"Wow." Was all she said, before Adderstar began to speak. Sitting taller to see and hear her leader, she took a deep breath, as the Gathering officially started.

~❁~

"...Until your leaders take you back to your respective territories, you are free to converse and socialize; Thank you for coming, and may the next five moons treat you well." Quailstar finished her speech and leaped down to talk to Ospreystar. Hopepaw was almost glad the speeches were over. Flickerstar had been livid at the theft and accused all of BleakClan of being no-good prey stealers. Adderstar had, of course, denied everything, but any time she looked at Bluepaw, the smug look on his face told her he wasn't guilty, and probably wouldn't even deny it if asked. She turned back to Shiverpaw and Swanpaw, who had stood up and were strolling away.

"Where are you guys going?" She asked, following them. Fallenpaw, Rubypaw and Obsidianpaw were now walking with them too. "We're going to meet the new Medicine cat apprentice and find Fallenpaw's sister, Morningpaw. That new Medicine cat is your brother, right?" She nodded, and they padded toward Screechpaw, who was talking to an older cat, presumably another Medicine cat, beside the Sacred Willow

Screechpaw's eyes brightened when he saw his sister, and he rushed over to her. "There are so many cats here!" He gasped. "Whoa, that's a lot of apprentices." His vibrant gaze drifted over to the young cats behind and around Hopepaw. They all greeted him warmly, except for... "Obsidianpaw, what's the matter?" Fallenpaw asked, looking alarmed as the huge black and charcoal-gray tom stalked over to Screechpaw. "I scented you and another cat around our border this afternoon. And-" His nostrils flared as he sniffed Screechpaw. "You have squirrel scent on you, you prey-stealer!" *Oh, stars, the squirrel fur Bluepaw and Emeraldpaw rubbed his nose in! He thinks he stole that prey!*

The small tabby tom realized the same thing, and shrank down, his eyes huge with terror. "No, you don't understand! My brother, he-" But before he could explain Obsidianpaw had his paw around his skinny neck, claws out, pinning him to the willow's rough trunk. Panic thrilled through Hopepaw as she saw him struggle against the chokehold, golden eyes bulging and filled with pure terror. His tail hung limp like a dead snake, barely touching the ground.

She could hear Fallenpaw calling for help behind her, and Swanpaw

or Shiverpaw trying to convince him to let the little Medicine cat go. The cats around her had descended into a state of chaos, all too shocked or scared to step in. But all noise droned away into a high-pitched ringing as she saw him stop struggling, his eyes rolling back before fluttering closed. *He's going to kill Screechpaw. He's going to kill my brother.*

All at once, she flew at Obsidianpaw, knocking him sideways, claws extended to sink into his chest. His acrid scent filled her nose, half-suffocating her, but she continued her attack, furiously tearing at his fur, feeling her short claws hit flesh, then, briefly, bone. He let out a wild cry of rage and pain, and dropped Screechpaw, leaving him hyperventilating and dry-heaving on the grass, half slumped over a root. She felt a scalding pain as he raked his claws across her shoulder, leaving long, crimson furrows in her pale fur. With a swing of his limb, he sent her reeling into the grass, before she sprang back to resume her attack, more feebly than before as blood spilled from her wounds. With a sinking heart, Hopepaw realized that she was losing the fight. He was simply too large for her to combat.

Now, Obsidianpaw had his claws around her neck. Claws dug into it, and she felt her vision blurring, as she writhed violently on the grass. Then, suddenly, she was free. Flickerstar and RippleClan's deputy, Mintbreeze held Obsidianpaw back, and she looked up to see Tumblesoar with his paws around her shoulders. Cries rang out, but she could barely hear them. All she wanted to know was if Screechpaw was okay. Her gaze found him, being tended to by a group of Medicine cats.

She felt lightheaded and dizzy. When she looked at her shoulder, it was drenched in blood. Tumblesoar was trying hard to look angry, but instead, he just looked terrified, calling out for help. "Why did you attack him?!" He gasped, voice rising in panic. "He-he had Screechpaw. He was going to kill him." She whispered, teeth gritted. She felt Tumblesoar and her mother, Gentlebreeze, lift her, holding her steady as they took her over to the shelter of a bush. "We'll get you some help, okay? Oh, Hopepaw..." Gentlebreeze's voice was trembling, and full of dread. "You saved Screechpaw. Thank you, my wonderful kit." She hurried out of the bush, calling

out for medical attention.

Hopepaw's vision began to clear, and the adrenaline of the fight started to wear off, leaving the pain of her wounds screaming their fury. She let her eyes close and waited for the help to come. *I saved Screechpaw.*

Fun Fact: Obsidianpaw has anger issues. That is why he jumped into a fight so quickly.

The Accident

[image]

More Screechpaw! Base by Louixie.

Hopepaw pretended to sleep, as Adderstar and the deputy, Lynxfury, talked in hushed, urgent voices. She knew it was rude to eavesdrop, but she needed any drama she could get. After being confined to her nest and the camp for three days, boredom seemed like it would kill her, rather than the wounds to her shoulder. They were almost healed, and she could leave for the first time later in the day. But for now, listening in on conversations would have to do.

"If we have one more incident with EmberClan, we'll have a full-on war on our paws. We *can't* have any more cats stealing or arguing across the borders!"

"I know, but how do we stop it? I've talked to the Clan. They said they'd disengage with the borders, but every day, or every few days, there's a new report."

"We've got to catch the cats doing the stealing. That, or stop patrolling the border, but that might be worse."

"Right. We'll figure it out." Adderstar finished halfheartedly, touching his nose to his deputy's. "I love you, Lynxfury. We'll prevent this war, alright? You don't need to worry." Lynxfury pressed against him affectionately. "I know we will. Love you too, Adderstar." Hopepaw lay silently in her nest. *I didn't know they were that close. They never even said they were mates.*

The two cats padded away, and Hopepaw waited a moment to stand up, so as not to raise suspicions. When she deemed it safe, she padded out of the shallow cave in the wall that held the Apprentice's den and headed for the fresh-kill hole. The hunting patrols were evidently still out, and nothing but feathers, and part

of a shrivelled-up starling. She wrinkled her nose at it and turned away. *Who leaves half of a bird in the hole? Either eat it or don't.*

Just when she was about to accept her fate of terrible boredom, Tumblesoar slipped into the cave. His ears pricked when he saw her, and he padded over to his apprentice. "Do you think you're ready to go outside? How do you feel?"

"Good! I'm ready to go out. Please, I'm sick of being down here."

"Alright, but nothing too strenuous. We didn't want those claw marks opening up again." Hopepaw groaned inwardly at his words. That probably means we'll be hunting... Well, it's better than being down in this cursed pit. As she looked closer at her mentor, waiting for him to move, she saw that his eyes were slightly red-tinged, and his nose was running. "You okay...?"

"Yeah, I just might be coming down with a cold. It's fine." He meowed dismissively. "Let's go."

~❁~

The sun shone warm on Hopepaw's long fur as she padded down into the forest. As she grew and got older, her fur had gone from kit-fluffy to more long, and silky. It still held some of its cloud-like qualities but wasn't entirely the same. Tumblesoar walked in front of her, not saying anything for once. A muted sniffle could be heard occasionally, but that was all.

She knew they were heading in the direction of a cove of beech trees, probably to hunt squirrels. But as they drew nearer to the desired hunting grounds, she smelled the acrid, smoky scent of EmberClan. She stiffened, and a low growl rumbled from her mentor's throat. Hackles raised, and she stalked quickly up beside Tumblesaoar. "Trespassers," He rasped angrily. "Look." She squinted and saw a flash of ginger, almost pink-tinged-and-black fur, and the glint of a pair of fiery eyes. They widened as they met Hopepaw's, and the strange cat froze. "Hey! This is BleakClan land!" She yowled, stepping forward a bit. "Scram, EmberClan scum-"

But before she could say or do anything rash, Tumblesoar placed a

paw on her shoulder. "Stop, let me handle it. This cat has been scented multiple times across the border, and she's only a young apprentice. Likely a scout or bait." Tumblesoar explained hurriedly, heading toward the cat. But before he could get close, she darted into the trees in the direction of the border, only stopping to yank something out of a low-growing shrub. A magpie. Stolen off of BleakClan's territory. Its wings dragged as she fled, and Tumblesoar began to sprint after the intruder. "Prey stealer! Get back here!"

Although most cats in BleakClan weren't made for speed, Tumblesoar was. He gained on the cat, quickly approaching the border. Hopepaw ran at his tail, chest heaving at the sudden exertion. But just as the tall tabby tom was close to catching her, she crossed the last few leaps between the two borders and disappeared into the shrubby, half-burnt-out land that was EmberClan's territory. "Hawk-dung," He cursed. "Another piece of prey stolen, and another thief we haven't been able to catch or confront." Hopepaw nodded, out of breath.

Tumblesoar let out a sneeze, tail twitching. "Okay. No use crossing the border. Try to catch something, and we'll go back to camp."

~❁~

With a jackdaw swinging from her jaws, Hopepaw re-entered the camp. It was still just after sunhigh, so most of the Clan was out hunting, patrolling or spending time outside. She dropped the bird in the fresh-kill hole and turned to Tumblesoar. He obviously wasn't feeling well, his nose running freely. "I'm going to go to Frostedmoss," He sniffed. "See if you can help Screechpaw with gathering herbs." Hopepaw's eyes lit up.

She, of course, had been spending quite a bit of time with him, since the attack at the Gathering. He hadn't had terrible wounds, and his injury had been mostly psychological. He, for obvious reasons, was shaken up by what had happened, and swore he would never interact with EmberClan again. And certainly not the apprentice who'd hurt him.

She headed for the Medicine den and peered into the dimly lit cave. The luminous lichen had grown longer than ever in the warmth of

the Snowgone season, and she could clearly see her little brother's shape outlined against the stone. She called out to him and he turned, eyes bright. The bruises around his neck, slender as that of a baby bird, weren't visible under his soft, tabby fur, and he looked healthy. "Hi, Hopepaw!" He chirruped, padding over to her. "What can I help you with?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Tumblesoar told me to help you gather herbs! Are you okay with going out?" She asked, quirking a fluffy brow. "Okay! Yeah, I'd be glad to go out. The sweet pine will be going out of season soon. It only grows well in Snowmelt and early Snowgone." His pelt was sprinkled with herb scraps, and Hopepaw gently flicked a small leaf off of his ear. "You've got a lil' something there." She purred. "Whoops. Thanks, Hopepaw, I've been sorting herbs all morning! Hold on, I've just got to tell Frostedmoss where we're going. He gets worried if I don't let him know."

He bounded off to his mentor, and Hopepaw waited, shifting her paws in impatience. She was finding it hard to sit still. As she looked around absentmindedly, she saw Emeraldpaw leaving the camp with her mentor, Wailingwind. Emeraldpaw caught her glance and curled a lip threateningly. Hopepaw's hackles went up, and she exposed her fangs in a silent snarl. As soon as Screechpaw reappeared with Frostedmoss' approval, she wiped the grimace off of her face and chatted beside him as they emerged into the bright, hot sunlight.

~❄~

"Whew, it's warmer than it usually is up here!" Hopepaw commented, and Screechpaw nodded in agreement. Usually, it was chillier up in the mountains, but warmth settled around the two siblings as they searched for herbs. *It is Snowgone, after all.*

Silence filled the air, not exactly an awkward silence, but more comfortable. But Hopepaw still felt like she had to fill the gap with conversation. "How do you feel... Mentally after all that mess at the gathering?"

"Oh... Well, it was *really* awful. I thought the cats of The Land of Shining Stars were there beside me, ready to take me away. But you

saved me! I don't think I ever thanked you properly, Hopepaw, but you really did. I'm sure I would have died if you hadn't stepped in."

"I'm sure someone would have jumped in to be the hero if I hadn't made a move first."

"Maybe, but that's not what happened. You got hurt to keep me from getting killed." He eyed the scabbed-over scratches on her shoulder with sympathy. "Thank you. You're the best sister any cat could ask for." Warmth spread through Hopepaw's chest at his words. "You're welcome. You'll always be safe with me."

"You promise?"

"Of course. I promise." She purred, stopping as Screechpaw's golden gaze fixed on a small tree. "There's some sweet pine! Come on!" He leaped happily over some rocks, making a beeline for the herb. She looked past the little tabby tom, and further up the mountain. Snowcapped like the rest, it was a typical, somewhat smaller mountain. She dimly recalled from an elders' story, that it was once apparently an avalanche site, but it had been so many moons ago that she wasn't at all worried.

She crouched on a flat rock, soaking up some sun as Screechpaw pulled and tugged at the needles, roots and branches of the small pine tree. It was a small breed of Evergreen tree, and its needles and roots were good for smoke inhalation and calming kits when chewed and eaten. She let her mind wander, and her eyes half-close, calm and happy.

"Hey, Hopepaw? Can you help me tug this root out?" Hopepaw opened her eyes and nodded. "Sure, one minute!" She stood up and padded over to him. "This one?" She queried, pointing her ginger-tipped paw at a root half-protruding from the dark soil. "Yep." Hopepaw bent down and sank her teeth into it, giving it a sharp tug. Suddenly, she felt a tremble below her paws. A rumble that grew into a roar. Screechpaw's shrill wail split the air, and her head snapped up as fast as a branch, suddenly free of snow. She saw a wall of dirty snow and stone barrelling toward the two apprentices, deadly, titanous, inescapable. "AVALANCHE!"

Hopepaw turned, frantically staring at Screechpaw. "We have to run-"

"There's no time!" His voice broke, turning into a sob of fear as he turned to face his sister. "Get under that rock." His paws met her wounded shoulder, pushing her under the same flat rock she had been resting on a minute ago, the adrenaline keeping her from feeling the pain of the shove. Tears of hysteria ran down her face in rivulets, and she reached out to pull him with her. "SCREECHPAW!" He was still out in the open, just out of reach. Screechpaw turned, eyes shining with tears and love he would never be able to express out loud. Their golden light was all she could see through the blur of panic that filled her head, her heart, her eyes, her very soul. She saw his silhouetted form run, making a break for the sanctuary of another rock.

He didn't make it to the rock before the avalanche reached him.

A ghastly scream shattered the air, and a wave of blackness washed everything away.

Fun Fact: If Screechpaw hadn't become a Medicine cat apprentice, he would have been given a warrior named Flurryflank as his mentor.

Whew, tension. I'll try not to leave you guys on a cliffhanger for too long! What do you think will happen to these two?

Taken by the Stars

[image]

Sad Hopepaw. Art by me.

This chapter contains dark themes such as death, injury, and hysteria. Reader discretion is advised.

The air was thick with dust and snow as Hopepaw regained consciousness. It was dim, although not completely pitch-black as she blinked, coughing violently. Her head spun and her eyes as she attempted to asses her injuries and situation. Immediately, it was clear that there was a huge problem. *Two*, big ones actually. The very rock that had saved her from being completely crushed or suffocated by the wave of snow had shifted, trapping her bushy tail under its massive weight. That same rock had created an air pocket that cradled Hopepaw, keeping her safe, but also imprisoning her.

How long was I out...? Oh stars, Screechpaw! I have to find him. What if he didn't make it to safety? He'll be suffocating! Panic nearly choked her as she strained against the rock that pinned her to the ground. I have to get to him! Her mind screamed, but the pain screamed louder. The bones in her tail felt like they'd been turned to powder, and the pure agony made her vision swim and go black around the edges. Tears leaked down her face, making tracks in her muddied fur.

She twisted violently, using her paws to push the massive stone up from her pulverized limb. And just barely, she felt it shift. "Yes..." Hopepaw muttered through gritted teeth, giving one hard yank on her tail. She felt the pressure release, and she was free.

She let a whimper escape her, as she laid eyes on her tail. It was absolutely ruined, flattened and practically reverberating in pain. Despite the utter hellfire raging in her appendage, she began to dig out of her frosty prison. A prison that could have easily become her tomb.

Her claws struck out at the stone and snow trapping her, and her paw pads stung from repeatedly being scraped. Light filtered palely through the last layer of snow, and she dug more furiously until her face was bathed in golden rays. Gasping hungrily at the fresh air, she looked around in horror at the destruction the avalanche had wrought. The sweet pines were gone, and the mountain seemed to have been torn apart. But she didn't stare at it too long. All that mattered was finding Screechpaw.

"Screechpaw!" She called, hoping he may have dug himself out. "Screechpaw, are you there?" *Where do I even start?* Glancing around wildly, her eyes darted from rock to rock, snowbank to snowbank, hoping to see him standing to the side with relief in his golden eyes.

Then, her eyes caught a black-and-white form, higher on the mountain, near where the avalanche had started. She could make out green eyes, and an unusual pattern on the cat's fur... *Is that Emeraldpaw?* "Help! Emeraldpaw, get a patrol! Please, hurry. It's Screechpaw, he's..." She trailed off. "He- We need help!" She saw Emeraldpaw give a slight nod, and disappear from view, When she looked around again, she found what she'd been hoping for, and yet, at the same time, dreading.

A paw sticking out of the snow.

It was just three toes, but they were his, alright. She raced over, prayers to all that was holy echoing around her head. *Please be okay. Please be in an air pocket. Please don't be gone. Please, please, don't let me be too late.* She dug frantically, snow spraying into the air behind her. She felt two claws snap in rapid succession, and her lungs ached from the dust, the snow, and the movement.

Hope was the only thing keeping her from totally breaking down and giving up. Hope that somehow, her beloved brother was alive in some incredible twist of fate, But the hope she'd been clinging to like a mother to their only kit, sheltering her from reality, came crashing down as her paw touched a cold, leaden shoulder. There was no airspace around it, and she knew that no cat could breathe through solid, hard-packed snow.

She tentatively dug around it, coming to a shoulder, a neck, a head. All covered in cream tabby fur, matted with snow.

His eyes were closed.

His neck, slender as a baby bird's, was bent at an angle that she knew to be utterly, heart-wrenchingly impossible.

He wasn't breathing.

She stared at the body that had once belonged to Screechpaw. She couldn't believe, couldn't comprehend, *didn't want* to understand that he was gone. Hopepaw, with tears spilling down her face like a waterfall, lifted him from the crushing coffin of snow and laid him before her paws. She didn't want to make the final call on whether he was gone or not. She placed a shaking forepaw against his chest and felt no familiar heartbeat. The gentle thudding she'd heard for the first six moons of her life sleeping beside him, since the moment she'd opened her eyes for the first time, was silent.

"Screechpaw?" She whispered, voice breaking as she spoke. "You're safe now. Y-you're free. Wake up, please..." But she knew he wasn't going to wake up. His limbs were splayed, his neck twisted, and his tiny body was covered in snow.

Her brother, her friend, and the cat she promised to keep safe forever were dead.

Hopepaw couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe. Blood roared in her ears, and the world spun, colours and shapes blurring into a sickening swirl of movement. She collapsed to the ground, head rested on his lifeless flank. She could hear a wail, and vaguely realized it was her jaws spilling the sound. "No, no, no, no, no!" She rasped, voice rising in hysteria. *I promised I'd protect him. I promised he'd be safe with me forever. I promised... I- I failed.* Broken sobs echoed over the avalanche site like the call of a morning dove.

"Why?! Why did you take him?!" She screamed at the cloudless sky. "He didn't deserve this! He was innocent, he was pure... *IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN ME-*" Hopepaw's voice was raw, and she was forced to stop screaming. The throbbing agony in her tail was nothing

compared to the pain in her heart, and she felt as if her world, her life, had ended. *I didn't even get to say goodbye...*

The shock and pain and emotions were all too much. She could feel the world spinning around her. Nothing made sense, and when she commanded her limbs to move, they didn't. Hopepaw, with difficulty, wrapped her forepaws around his body, tears pooling in his downy fur. She felt his fur cooling, his muscles growing stiff. With one final gasping sob, she let the soft, comforting darkness whisk her away.

~❄~

"Are they both dead?"

"Look! Hopepaw's breathing!"

"But Screechpaw's not...."

Voices floated through the air around Hopepaw, as she hazily began to wake up. For a moment, she didn't realize where she was. Why her tail hurt so badly. Why every muscle ached, why it was so cold, and why the scent of death hung in the air. But then, reality struck her like a peregrine falcon striking a gopher. *Screechpaw's dead. My tail's shattered. The avalanche ruined everything.*

She opened one bloodshot, blurry eye to see Gentlebreeze staring down at her. Pure devastation filled her gaze, and tears shone in her honey-golden eyes. "Hopepaw... Oh stars, *what happened*?" Her voice crackled and Hopepaw looked away from her, and down at Screechpaw. He was curled stiffly on the ground, and the light of a pink sunset made his fur glow with a rose-coloured aura. "An avalanche," She croaked. "Screechpaw... He-he's dead."

She buried her muzzle in Gentlebreeze's long, fluffy fur, dry sobs wracking her body. Although she certainly wanted to cry, wanted nothing more than to cry, she had no tears left in her body. Cats milled around them in panic, Frostedmoss, Bluepaw, Tumblesoar and Adderstar among them. Frostedmoss crouched over his apprentice's body, quaking with grief. "Screechpaw, you *can't* be gone. You were so close to your name. You were *so close*..."

She numbly felt cats supporting her as they started to walk. All she felt was a bleak emptiness, and as soon as she was brought to a nest in the Medicine den, she curled into it and didn't stir. *I'll never move again. It isn't worth it. Not without him. Not alone. Not when I was the one who insisted we go out to pick herbs and put him in harm's way. It's my fault he's dead.*

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw his face, his body, the look in his eyes just before the avalanche struck. She couldn't believe he was gone. With cats murmuring all around her, and Frostedmoss gently splinting her tail, she slipped into a nightmare-filled, troubled sleep.

Fun Fact: The avalanche was caused by warm weather that melted the snow higher on the mountains.

Bonus Fact, to ease everybody's minds: Screechpaw died quickly and with little pain, and now lives happily in The Land of Shining Stars.

Nightmares

[image]

Hopepaw. Base by Louixie.

The dark shadows under Gentlebreeze's eyes, like drops of grief-dulled honey, made them seem to glow brighter as she took one last look at her daughter and padded quietly out of the Medicine den. "Try to get some sleep, okay? Frostedmoss will be along soon to check on you." Hopepaw didn't acknowledge her mother's words. She didn't have the energy to. Didn't want to. *Couldn't.*

In the three days since Screechpaw had been killed and she'd been injured, she'd been plagued by nightmares. Fabrications where it had been Screechpaw who was digging to reach Hopepaw, buried deep in the snow as she slowly suffocated. Dreams where, no matter how long or hard she dug, she could never reach him. At least once a night, she woke up screaming.

And then, there was her injured tail. It throbbed constantly, but as long as she didn't move it too much, the sharp, shooting pain didn't show. It had turned out to be completely snapped-though in three places and likely cracked in many more. But today, she felt terrible all over. She felt like she'd fallen asleep in a direct beam of sunlight but in a bad way. The heat felt heavy and sickly. *Fever... It's probably infected.*

Now, her eyes felt sore and heavy, but she didn't dare sleep. *I don't want to see anything horrible happen to Screechpaw anymore. I've seen enough. I just want to rest.* But just as she'd closed her eyes, she heard soft paw steps at the mouth of the Medicine den. It was Frostedmoss, back from gathering herbs or doing other chores. "Hello, Hopepaw. How are you this morning?" She opened one bloodshot eye and gazed forlornly at the Medicine cat. It was obvious he too was grieving, judging by the drag in his step, and the way his eyes didn't shine with their usual enthusiasm.

He bent down beside her nest and began to unwrap the bindings

and herbs from around her broken tail. She took a look at his face, and concern was written all over it. He pulled out some herbs from a wrap and pushed them toward the grief-stricken, injured apprentice. "Eat these. We need to bring down that fever." She simply looked at the leaves, not making a move toward them. She closed her eyes again. "Hopepaw, please. I know, it hurts. I know, you miss Screechpaw. I do too. I miss him more than anything. But trust me, it will be less painful over time. Screechpaw's memory, and your tail. But you can't heal, physically or mentally, if you don't try."

Frostedmoss's eyes glistened with unspilt tears, as he waited for her to speak, or eat the herbs. When she finally did, Frostedmoss looked horrified. "What if I don't want to get better?" She croaked. It was the first time she'd spoken in almost two days, and her voice crackled and broke. "Of course, you want to get better." He insisted, pushing the herbs closer to her muzzle. "Just eat the herbs, and I'll leave you be. Alright?" Finally, she caved and licked the herbs up, hardly wincing at their bitter juices. "Thank you. Try to sleep, and I'll be back in the evening."

Hopepaw allowed her head to rest heavily on the side of her nest and let out a tired sigh. *I might as well try to sleep,* she thought hazily as her eyes fluttered closed. Soon enough, she felt the fog of sleep wash over her and she drifted off into a reluctant slumber.

As soon as Hopepaw opened her eyes, she recognized the disorienting, disconnected feeling of a dream. That, or a nightmare. Her chest tightened with panic, and her breaths came fast and ragged as she desperately tried to snap herself out of the fantom reality. She felt rooted to the ground, paralyzed on her paws. Voices began to reverberate through the foggy white mist around her, and, with horror, she realized that she could hear Screechpaw. "Hopepaw, help me!"

"Hopepaw, save me!"

"It's crushing me..."

"It hurts! Oh, it hurts..."

As the voices grew louder all around the terrified apprentice, she pinned

her ears back on her head and shut her eyes tight. Stop... *She pleaded silently. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry. Screechpaw, please-" Hyperventilating for air as the voices seemed to fill her lungs, her throat her very soul, as she crumpled to whatever ground was below her, suddenly able to move. The voices bored into her mind, and she blacked out, back into reality.*

With a gasp, she awoke to her mother's concerned face staring down at her. "You were having another nightmare, love. Calm down. It was all just a dream."

"But I could hear him- He was calling out to me, he said..." She broke off, hot tears stinging her eyes. "It's okay," Gentlebreeze whispered, gently curling around Hopepaw as she lay, shuddering in her nest. Hopepaw buried her face in her mother's soft fur, letting her familiar scent calm her as tears coursed down her cheeks. "It'll all be okay."

~❄~

Hopepaw burned with fever as she lay, panting in her nest. Frostedmoss mixed anti-inflammatory herbs, fever treatments, and almost anything else he could think of for the last five days, but the remedies seemed to be failing. For what seemed like the thousandth time that day, Frostedmoss lifted Hopepaw's tail in a careful gray-and-white paw and set it back down with a sigh of defeat.

"Hopepaw, there's something I need to discuss with you." He began, and Hopepaw fixed her fever-blurred gaze on the senior medicine cat. "Your tail is... Getting to the point where it is starting to die off." Fear stabbed through Hopepaw. "Does that mean I'm going to die?"

"No, no. But, if we don't do something about it, you might." He meowed gently. "I think I'm going to have to amputate your tail." Hopepaw stared at him, dumbfounded. "You want to... Take my tail off?"

"Yes. It's relatively safe. I'll give you poppy seeds, and you'll sleep through the whole thing. Besides, with the dying of a limb, comes the dying of nerves. That's why you can't feel it well past a certain

point. Wolfwhisper had to have one of his toes amputated after it was so badly frostbitten that it turned black, and Elkantler had multiple toes taken way too; it's for the best."

"Isn't there anything else you can do?" She asked fervently. *I don't want to lose my tail!* "We've tried everything." He explained. "As I said, if your tail isn't taken off, the fever and infection will get worse, and then you'll *really* be in trouble." He went silent, waiting for Hopepaw's consent to remove the dying limb. Hopepaw felt sick to her stomach, and her head spun. The combination of the fever and the conflicting decision was almost too much.

"...Okay."

Fun Fact: Bluepaw is grieving for Screechpaw too, but he doesn't express it like Hopepaw does, and he doesn't feel the loss as strongly.

Survivors' Guilt

[image]

Emeraldpaw, above! Base by Louixie!

To Hopepaw, it seemed so wrong to look back and not see her long, bushy tail draped over the edge of her nest. When she went to curl it over her nose or around her body to doze or rest, she was left with a stump flicking against her thin flanks. Though still agonizingly painful, the infection had abated, and she was in no immediate danger unless it re-infected.

But her missing limb was nothing compared to the grief she still felt. At first, she hadn't wanted to even believe it. She'd have fever-fueled hallucinations, where he would be sorting herbs beside her, talking to her, or walking in front of her. But now, with a clearer head, she was forced to fully acknowledge that he was gone. Nothing felt the same. And Hopepaw knew that nothing would probably ever be, or feel the same again.

Head resting limply on the side of her nest, she saw Bluepaw and Emeraldpaw pad past the Medicine den. Bluepaw was gazing at the sleek black-and-white mottled she-cat with stars in his eyes, as his fascination padded confidently over to her mentor. Dimly, she noted that she was probably close to having her Warrior Assessment.

She narrowed her eyes at Bluepaw, a sudden prick of anger flaming in her chest. *Does he not even miss Screechpaw? Does he not care that his own brother is buried in the cold, hard ground, and his own sister just had her tail removed? Stupid question. All he cares about is Emeraldpaw.*

She looked away and turned on her side to gaze at the stone walls of the den. The lichen's radiance cast an eerie, silver-blue light on the mottled rockface as her fury subsided into a desolate numbness. She shut her eyes, but before she could even try to sleep, a cat cleared his throat at the entrance of the den. She looked over to

find Tumblesoar standing there with a wood pigeon clasped in his jaws.

"Hey, Hopepaw. How are you?" He asked, keeping his voice low and quiet. He padded over to her nest and dropped the prey, its scent settling over the den like a dense fog. Though it smelled wonderful, Hopepaw wasn't hungry. *Why should I get to eat, when Screechpaw can't? When I took that away from him? T*he last time she'd eaten was just before the amputation, nearly two days ago. Silently, she gave a subtle nod to her mentor and returned to staring at the wall. He sighed sadly. "I'm so sorry this happened. I shouldn't have let you go on your own. Your tail, Screechpaw...." He paused, eyes glittering in distress. "I take all the blame. I'm so sorry."

Hopepaw was confused. *It's not your fault, it's mine!* She cried silently. "Oh, Hopepaw, you're so skinny. I can see all your ribs through your fur. Eat, please." He rasped, a desperate note ringing in his words. She simply shook her head and curled tighter into her nest. "Try," Tumblesoar whispered, turning to leave. "The whole Clan is worried about you. We've lost one apprentice, we don't want to lose another. Try to, at least, eat something."

I bet Bluepaw isn't worried. She thought bitterly but didn't say anything as he left. Tired of being awake, she closed her eyes and finally retreated into the soft blackness of sleep.

~❁~

Gentlebreeze stripped a small piece of pigeon flesh off of the bird's wing, pushing it toward her daughter. "Hopepaw, please. Eat just this little bit." She begged, golden eyes radiating her anxiety. Hopepaw's nose crinkled at the scent, suddenly repulsed at the thought of eating. Frustrated, Gentlebreeze set the prey back on the ground. "Why won't you eat?"

"Because Screechpaw can't."

"You... Oh." She sat down heavily. "I know what's going on. I've spoken to Frostedmoss. You're experiencing something called 'Survivors' Guilt.' You survived, and he didn't. You feel like you can't do what you need because he can't anymore. It happens to many

cats when they survive a big tragedy like a blizzard or a battle, and someone they love doesn't."

"How does that help me? He's still dead. I killed him." Tears filled her eyes, and they stung as Gentlebreeze blinked with shock. "No, you didn't." Her voice quivered, and she wrapped her paws around her daughter. "It wasn't your fault. It was an accident."

"I told him to come out herb gathering with me! He pushed me out of the way when he should have saved himself." She looked down at her paws, anger, grief and guilt swirling around in her gut like a bitter storm. Gentlebreeze's eyes shone with barely-restrained tears, and she let out a sigh. "He wanted you to live. He was always like that, selfless and kind. He probably knew he wouldn't escape, but he wanted to give you a chance. How do you think he feels, watching you starve yourself? Live like he'd want you to live. Live for him."

Hopepaw thought about her mother's words for a moment. "I never thought of it like that."

"I felt the same way after your father died. But, I lived because I wanted you, Screechkit, and Bluekit to live too. You forget that everyone's gone through grief at some point, not just you. We may have lost him, but you can keep his memory alive."

Though grief still fogged her thoughts and made her heart ache, she felt a bit less awful. Hopepaw bent down and took a bite of the pigeon, eating ravenously, suddenly starving. "Thank the Stars," Gentlebreeze sighed, relieved. She paused her hungry tearing to glance at the soft, cream-and-gray she-cat. "Thanks, Mother."

"Try to get some sleep. Frostedmoss will be back soon to give you some more herbs." She murmured, slipping away.

~❄~

Cats chattered excitedly in the central area of the camp, as Emeraldpaw, and her mentor, Pinestalk, padded down from the tunnel. The pretty black-and-white apprentice hefted a huge hare in her jaws, eyes twinkling with pride. Hopepaw stared at her,

watching as her gaze found Bluepaw, and she immediately began to talk to him. A glaze seemed to fall over the tall blue tom's eyes as he watched her speak, not a muscle in his body moving as if in fear of missing a single word she said.

Can you make it any more obvious that you are head-over-paws with her? She thought, irritated. Even before her accident, it had been almost sickening to watch her own brother fall in love with such a stubborn, cold, controlling she-cat. Now, she had no choice but to watch numbly, while her tail and broken heart healed. And with her Warrior Ceremony being that very sunset, she was sure that the second Bluepaw too became a warrior, they would be mates.

See if I care. If he's stupid enough to get into this, if he's pigeon-brained enough to let her control him, any 'wake-up call' I give him will go in one ear and out the other.

Now, Adderstar's commanding yowl could be heard over the din. "Cats of BleakClan, gather at the Sacred Cliff for the making of a new warrior!" Hopepaw watched as pelts blended together, cats padding hurriedly up onto the cliff where the ceremony would be held, the very place she'd received her apprentice's name.

Frostedmoss was the only other cat still left in the camp, with even the elders having been led up into the light of the dying sun. "Are you going to go watch her get her name? It's a very important occasion. I can help you up there."

"No... I don't think I'm ready to walk that far yet."

"Sure you are! It's good for you."

"Maybe another day. I don't want to."

"Come on." He insisted, rising to his paws and brushing herb scraps out of the thick mane of fur around his neck. He stretched out a paw, basically trapping Hopepaw into taking it and rising to her paws. Her legs felt weak; she hadn't been walking much, spending her days curled in her nest, the only emotions she felt being numbness, anger and guilt. Not keen to watch a useless ceremony for the cat she hated most, she let her paws drag, concentrating on

not letting her tail, still swaddled like a newborn kit, bob too much as she walked.

Most of the Clan was already gathered up, a few fox-lengths from the edge of the cliff, and a few cats turned to look at Hopepaw in surprise as she sat down between Gentlebreeze, and another warrior named Batwhistle. The stout, black she-cat glanced down at her, eyes lingering for a bit too long on her cobweb-wrapped tail stump. She shuffled to the side to give her more room and pricked her tall, slender ears as Adderstar began to speak.

"Emeraldpaw, step forward and gaze up to the sky so that the Stars may see you." *What stars?* Hopepaw thought, wryly. *It's sunset, but it's not night.* She stepped forward, proud as a strutting pheasant. "Wailingwind, has your apprentice learned the meaning of our noble code?"

"She has."

"Emeraldpaw, state the seven most important rules of the code in order." Adderstar watched her expectantly, as she took a deep breath and began to speak.

"Cats may not kill or injure their Clanmates or kin, unless in self-defence. Cats may not give up the lifestyle of a noble warrior, to take up residence in the home of a Twoleg." She spoke confidently, rattling off the first two rules with ease. "Borders are to be respected at any cost. Gatherings are a Sacred time, and conflict is forbidden..." She paused to think.

"The life of a kit is the most Sacred, fragile form of life, and they are to be protected at any cost, no matter their Clan or the crimes their kin may have committed. A cat can only have a non-platonic relationship with a cat of their own Clan, and..." She faltered, and Adderstar quirked a brow, obviously urging her to keep speaking. "Oh- When taking their warrior name, said cat pledges complete loyalty to their Clan, and code."

Satisfied, Adderstar nodded. Hopepaw narrowed her eyes. *I was hoping she'd forget them.* "Wailingwind, has your apprentice learned the necessary skills of a warrior?"

"She has."

"Then, I hail you, Emeraldpaw, by your new name, Emeraldshatter. With the pelt holding the likeliness of shining, shattered ice, I honour you for your pride."

Cats yowled out Emeraldshatter's new name, eyes shining in the dusk as the sun finally sank below the distant horizon. Drained, just from sitting up and watching something so-in her eyes- tedious, she barely looked at the young warrior and started her descent down into the camp.

None of her Clanmates called her back or saw her slip away, and the quiet of the underground abode was like the soft, almost suffocating wing of some great bird. Numb of all emotion, she crept into her nest and closed her eyes.

Fun Fact: There are really twelve rules in the code, but the remaining five are more minor than the ones stated in this chapter.

A Haunted Reflection

[image]

Hopepaw's headshot! Base by Louixie.

"Okay, Hopepaw, you're good to go outside! Have fun!" Frostedmoss meowed cheerfully, plastering the last bit of fresh cobweb onto the bare stump of the scarred tail. "Thanks, Frostedmoss," Hopepaw replied quietly. "For everything." The gray-and-white patched tom shrugged. "Just doing my job."

The camp was nearly empty of warriors, the heat of Snowgone season drawing every cat up into the sun's golden light. Even the elders had been guided up to the top of the tunnel to bask on the warm stone. Really, Hopepaw missed the feeling of the sun on her fur. She wanted to be outside, but the memory of Screechpaw hung heavy above her head, a dark cloud blotting out any thought of enjoying a day outside. Enjoying anything, really. It had been close to a quarter moon since the accident, but the loss was as fresh as a sharp thorn scratch in her heart.

But, just as she was about to turn back and find a secluded place to spend another day in camp, Tumblesoar appeared at the mouth of the tunnel. "Hopepaw! There you are. Come on, I'm going to take you down to the lower forest. To celebrate your first day out!" Hopepaw jumped at his voice and turned to face her mentor, fur raised slightly on the back of her neck. "Oh... Okay." She answered, her voice lacking much emotion, not bothering to sound excited.

Tumblesoar's ears drooped slightly. "Aren't you excited? You've been trapped here for weeks! Surely you must want to go out." Hopepaw shook her head slightly. "I don't want to. I'd rather sleep for a while." Tumblesoar quirked a brow. "It'll be good for you. We're going."

Reluctantly, Hopepaw began to lope slowly behind her mentor as he scaled the tunnel. Light appeared, dazzlingly bright in the near distance, and Hopepaw squinted as it got brighter. As she reached

the top, she drew a deep breath of mountain air, sweet with the scent of warm stone, and fragrant plant life. The sun nearly blinded her with its intensity, and her eyes burned from the sudden burst of luminosity. Tumblesoar stood beside her, a small smile etched across his muzzle. "It's a nice day, isn't it? Just beautiful. It's rarely this warm, so high up."

His words made a shiver of fear and grief tingle through her pelt like lightning. Those were almost the same words she had spoken to Screechpaw, as small talk, while they hunted for the sweet pine. Right before the avalanche that had not only brought the mountain, but Hopepaw's entire life crashing down around her. Her eyes glazed as she remembered the moments of pure, white-hot fear before everything went black, the sound of the wave of snow rushing down the slopes to meet them...

"Are you okay?" Tumblesoar asked gently, placing a paw on her shoulder. "Y-yeah. I'm alright..." She whispered, still quaking slightly. A hawk let out a raucous cry somewhere above them, and Tumblesoar began his descent down the mountain, glancing back to make sure his apprentice was following. With one last backward look at the soft darkness of the tunnel, she let out a quiet sigh and started after him.

~❁~

Leaves rustled gently above Hopepaw's head as she and Tumblesoar padded through the bright green forest. A squirrel chattered in the branches of an oak, and the distant trickling of the creek could be heard through the trees. The full heat of Snowgone blasted the two cats, and only the shade of the foliage graced them from completely overheating. "Nice, isn't it?" Tumblesoar meowed from a few pawsteps ahead of her. "Yeah," Hopepaw murmured, changing course to try and get to the creek. "It's a bit hot, though."

"Well, this is the hottest time of the season. I pity those MeadowClan cats; they have no shade on their territory! Imagine how sweltering it would be in those fields and moors."

Tumblesoar chattered cheerfully on, seeming to have endless things to talk about. Hopepaw nodded absently every once in a while to give the illusion that she cared, but really, she was disconnected

from everything, in her own little world inside her head.

It was a world where the avalanche had never happened, and instead of Tumblesoar rambling on ahead of her, it was Screechpaw. Emeraldpaw didn't exist in her perfect world, and Bluepaw was a decent cat again. In the world she so desperately wanted to be in, she still had her tail, and there was no border tension between Clans. *But that's not my world. My world is cruel and hot, and unfair. In this cursed world, The Land of Shining Stars takes cats just out of kittenhood, for no reason.*

Anger slowly swelled within Hopepaw's chest, like a thunderstorm brewing in a dark sky. But before she could make herself angrier, the creek came into view, its crystal-clear water flowing lazily over the smooth gray stones that filled the creekbed. She slid down the crumbling earth that lined the water and dipped her paws into the stream. It was cold, but not freezing, and she stood there a moment, watching the water flow over her ginger-and-cream paws, distorting and blurring them before her very eyes.

Her reflection too was blurry on the water's surface, and she, with some difficulty, studied herself. Dark circles sat like a calico's patches under and around her slightly sunken-down eyes, obviously a result of the nightmares that still plagued her. Hopepaw's fur was a bit messy; she hadn't groomed herself before she'd gone out, and her face held a frown that seemed to be permanently etched across her young muzzle.

But her eyes themselves were what truly scared her. They were haunted and dull... Bloodshot around the edges, the bright scarlet lines fading into the once-firey irises. One golden, one amber, her soul seemed to stare into itself through the broken eyes. She broke her own gaze. *I look like a mess...* She stumbled back, stunned. *That can't be me. I look like a monster.*

Tumblesoar skidded down the riverbank, nearly slipping right into the creek. He teetered on the edge for a moment, before righting himself with an embarrassed huff. "Whoops. It's a bit crumbly." He meowed, flicking his tail away as it settled into the chilly water.

"Anyway, I scented a pheasant near the border with EmberClan.

Want to go try to catch it?" He asked, tipping his blue-tinted head toward the border. "Okay," Hopepaw answered, not even really registering his words. She felt numb.

Trailing after her mentor, she suddenly realized that the acrid, smoky scent of EmberClan was much stronger than it should have been. And it smelled like more than just border markings; it was more like many, many individual cats had crossed their border.

"Tumblesoar," she mewed hesitantly. "I can smell-" But before she could finish her sentence, she saw them. Four, large EmberClan cats stood a few fox lengths from the borderline, one of their rank crouching over the limp body of a pheasant. She made eye contact with the bird's killer, and as she met his cold aqua eyes, she felt a chill of fear and realization trickle down her spine. It was Obsidianpaw, the cat that nearly killed Screechpaw.

With blood on his teeth and fire in his eyes, he snarled savagely at Hopepaw. She was frozen as her mind flashed back to the chaos of the moment that Obsidianpaw had pressed Screechpaw up against the Sacred Willow, apathetic as the helpless apprentice slowly asphyxiated. Hopepaw's mouth went dry. Her legs went weak.

"HOPEPAW, *RUN!*"

A Message From the Stars

[image]

Black roses signefy dispair, rebirth, and vengeance among other things. I thought this peice would fit with Hopepaw's lore and story, considering the title of the book is literally 'Poisonberry's Vengeance'

Without a second thought, Hopepaw turned and ran. She heard jeers and cries rise in her wake, Obsidianpaw leaping up to give chase. She could practically feel the shaggy charcoal-coloured tom's rancid breath on the pads of her paws as she sprinted blindly, following the tip of Tumblesoar's bobbing tail as it weaved through the brush.

Her lungs burned, her throat ached, and panic sent the world to blur around her, colours and shapes melting into a sickening swirl of motion. "Let her go, Obsidiansmoke!" Came a shout from far behind them. "Pathetic kit doesn't even have a tail! She's not worth it." The sound of heavy paws beating the forest floor quieted until Hopepaw could only hear the roaring of blood in her own ears.

Tumblesoar skidded to a halt in front of his apprentice, after a moment more of racing. His breath came in gasps, and his fur was wild. Hopepaw could imagine she looked a whole lot worse.

"Are you okay? Oh, Hopepaw, I shouldn't have taken you so close to the border." His face was wrought with anxiety, which quickly hardened into an expression of pure outrage. "Those EmberClan cats have taken it too far." He spat. "First they jeer at us over the borders, then they steal prey, and then they try to attack an innocent apprentice!" Sighing, he turned away and signalled Hopepaw to follow him. "We must report this to Adderstar."

Hopepaw, overwhelmed and still trying to catch her breath, followed him numbly. As the adrenaline wore off, she could feel her

tail stump aching where the strain of the run had nearly split the weak scar tissue. Her head spun, as she closed her eyes tight. *Why did I even go outside?*

~❄~

Murmurs echoed around the camp, worried and hushed as Tumblesoar spoke to Adderstar. Adderstar's ice-blue eyes were sharp with worry, and he paced in front of the smaller grayish-blue tom. "So, they stole prey, and chased you and Hopepaw away from the border?" He questioned, tail flicking. "Yes. We didn't even get to confront them before they initiated the attack"

"I see," He muttered. "The next gathering is too far away. I need to confront Flickerstar tomorrow." He paused for a moment, searching the crowd of gathered cats. "Beartooth, Thawedsnow, Lynxfury, and Tumblesoar. Tomorrow, at dawn, we'll travel to EmberClan's camp and... Talk to them." Cats began to disperse again, retreating into dens or back up the tunnel.

That left Hopepaw curled in her nest. Frostedmoss had already provided her with some herbs for the shock, but she found that sleep wouldn't come. Neither would peace of mind. Before her accident, she would have pleaded and begged and complained and bargained until she could come on an exciting mission into the heart of an enemy Clan's territory. But now, there seemed no point; it all appeared so senseless and dull. She closed her eyes, and let sleep finally claim her.

Hopepaw dreamed...

Terror shot through Hopepaw as she awoke in the weightless, muffled surroundings of another nightmare. But this didn't seem like another horrible fantasy. This place had somewhat of a peaceful atmosphere; it was as still as the mountains just before dawn, and the scent of something sweet- lilacs, or flower nectar- hung in the air. Nonetheless, she was on edge, her fur raised along her spine and her eyes darting nervously. Suddenly, a cat materialized out of seemingly thin air, his blue-gray pelt speckled with innumerable stars, and his eyes filled with serene tranquillity. Instantly, the young she-cat recognized him. "Father?" The huge tom nodded and touched his nose to hers.

"Hopepaw, my beautiful daughter. Look at you..." Ashenwater's voice trailed off, blue eyes alight with sorrow. But Hopepaw cared little about simple greetings and pity. "Is Screechpaw here? Can I see him? Is he okay?"

"Screechpaw is in a different part of The Land of Shining Stars. Only Omenbringers and Dreamwalkers can be here." Hopepaw was puzzled, and disappointed. "Omenbringers? Dreamwalkers? What are they?" Ashenwater smiled faintly. "That's what I am. I'm an Omenbringer. I deliver news, good and bad, or messages to cats while they dream. Usually, these omens only go to leaders, deputies and Medicine cats, but this is a special occasion. I don't really have permission to be here, but here I am."

"Okay... But why do you have to speak to me?" She asked, almost scared of what he would say. "I'm actually bringing a message from Screechpaw himself. The little Guardian Angel has been looking out for you from up here, and he's worried about you." Hopepaw's heart started to beat faster.

"I'll try to quote as best I can to what he said. 'Hopepaw, you need to stop blaming yourself for what happened. It was nobody's fault, and I knew what was going to happen to me when I pushed you out of the way." Hopepaw's eyes welled up with tears. "I love you, and even though I only lived a bit of my life, you made it better than I could have ever hoped for. Get your warrior name for me, okay?" Tears now trickled freely down Hopepaw's soft cream-coloured cheeks, and she wiped them away. Ashenwater's luminous eyes were damp too, and he blinked.

"You'll be waking up soon, Hopepaw. Take what he said to heart, alright?" She nodded in response, watching as her father faded before her very eyes.

Soon, she opened her eyes to the familiar stone walls of the Apprentice den. She felt more rested than she had in nearly a moon, and she sat for a moment letting her eyes adjust to the dark. Unknowingly, she'd slept until the middle of the night and doubted she could fall asleep again. The soft snoring and murmuring of sleeping cats broke the silence as Hopepaw slipped from her nest, fur turned snow-white by the glowing lichen, as she made her way up through the tunnel and into the moonlight. It was almost a full

moon, and silvery light cast a ghostly, pale shine over the whole valley, turning the mountains to crystal and the lake to liquid star.

With a heavy heart, Hopepaw lay down on a large, flat stone near the edge of the cliff, a soft Snowgone breeze whispering through her long fur. She allowed her eyes to close, and her head to rest on her paws. The message from Screechpaw had been nice and brought a bit of comfort, but it had also made her heart ache with lonely grief. Alone, with only the stars and sky to keep her company, Hopepaw felt like she was the only cat in the world, left to helm a sea of anguish alone. She curled tighter around herself, a bitter lump swelling in her throat until she could barely breathe.

As the sky darkened in preparation for the spectacular lightshow of dawn, Hopepaw crept back to her nest. Bluepaw was tucked into his nest, snoring gently, his flanks rising and falling gently. With a pang, she realized how much she and Bluepaw had drifted apart; they barely spoke past a few words, and any attempt at conversation would end with awkward silence or an excuse to leave the discussion. Warriors were beginning to stir for the first patrols, but Hopepaw was determined to stay in her nest. She simply didn't have the energy or reason to rise.

Fun Fact: Tumblesoar does, in fact, have some MeadowClan blood! This means that Hopepaw too has a very small concentration of MeadowClan in her, but it is extremely diluted. Tumblesoar just happened to get a larger share of their genes, and he was more closely related to the HalfClan warrior, Hopepaw's step-Grandfather.

Tumblesoar's Story

[image]

Tumblesoar above! Base by Louixie!

Thunder crashed and rumbled above the cave, making the stone walls practically reverberate with the storm's force. Water dripped through the cracks in the ceiling, and warriors constantly replaced moss to soak up the puddles.

It was humid, loud and stuffy in the subsurface camp, and BleakClan's mood had soured. Hopepaw crouched in her nest, paws covering her ears as lightning split the sky. She'd found that loud noises- like thunder, or Monsters- were a lot more terrifying after the avalanche. They brought a flood of unwelcome memories and fear rushing back into her head. But, there was nothing she could do about thunderstorms, however annoying and frightening they were.

From across the camp, she could see Emeraldshatter and Bluepaw huddled together. Despite Emeraldshatter no longer being an apprentice, she still had her claws latched onto Bluepaw. And he didn't see any problem with it. *Really it's sickening,* she thought. *So young, and already trapped in a cage by the worst cat in the Clan.* Over the soft conversation of older warriors, she could just barely hear what Emeraldshatter was saying. "Oh, Bluepaw, thunderstorms are *so* scary! But luckily, you're here-" Her voice was cut off by another crash of thunder, and she glanced in mock fear around the camp, her limpid green eyes holding a coldness that nearly made Hopepaw shiver.

She sighed. *Wow*. Circling in her nest until she was turned away from the two cats she waited for the violent Snowgone storm to end.

The thunder began to fade away until it was no more than a distant rumble, and warriors began to return to their duties outdoors. Tumblesoar peeked into the Apprentices' den, a sunny smile

plastered across his long, blue-gray muzzle. "Hey there, Hopepaw! You ready to go do some training?" Hopepaw gazed at him for a moment, and heaved herself to her paws, stretching until her ginger-tipped toes quivered. "Yeah," She answered tonelessly, following behind her mentor as he left the den and walked toward the tunnel.

He glanced back at the short-limbed apprentice, brow quirked in concern. "Are you alright?"

"Oh... Yeah, fine. Why?"

"You sound kind of hollow. Are you feeling sick? Are those nightmares back?"

"Nope." She replied, forcing cheer into her mew. She wasn't entirely telling the truth; nightmares still plagued her at times, causing her to wake up in a cold sweat, shaking with tears in her eyes. In fact, she'd had one the night before. They were still always about Screechpaw and left her feeling empty inside.

Hopepaw could feel that her smile was sickly-sweet and obviously faked, but at least it was something. "Let's go." Tumblesoar nodded slowly, hesitant to accept her answer. "Alright. Let's head down to the willows near the creek, and practice battle moves, okay?"
"Okay."

~❄~

The ground was soggy underpaw, as Hopepaw and Tumblesoar trekked through the forest. Being careful not to trod on worms, she followed Tumblesoar's snakelike tail as it threaded rhythmically through the lush, green brush, made vibrant by the recent rain.

Focusing on her paws and her mentor's tail, Hopepaw jumped in fright as a magpie let out a loud alarm call, wings flapping noisily as it hopped from one tree to the next, cawing at the two cats. In one of the trees, a messy nest of twigs sat nestled in the crook of two branches.

"Look!" Tumblesoar exclaimed. "There's a nest. I know a couple of cats who love eggs; myself included. Shall we try to get them?"

Hopepaw glanced up at the nest. She'd never tried eggs and was curious. "Sure. But won't the tree be slippery? From the rain?"

"We'll be fine. I'm good at climbing." He assured the apprentice, crouching low and springing onto the lowest branch, digging his claws in. "Come on up!" Hopepaw hesitated. *I've only practiced tree climbing twice...* Ignoring her own concerns, she leaped up onto the branch beside Tumblesoar, struggling to keep hold. By the time she'd steadied herself, the sleek grayish-blue tom was already two branches higher.

The magpie was hysterical, diving at the two cats as they carefully scaled the large oak tree. With a hiss, Hopepaw struck out at the bird with a fluffy ginger-and-cream paw, nearly falling in the process. Feathers ruffled, the magpie continued to screech at Tumblesoar and Hopepaw, its cries growing louder as they made their way to the nest.
Peering into it, Hopepaw could see two nestlings, no more than a few days old, and two eggs. The nestlings were both mostly naked, with small tufts of black fuzz scattered across their tiny bodies, beaks opened wide in whiny screeches.

Tumblesoar reached into the nest of moss and twigs, and pulled out the eggs, cupping them under his chin as he retreated down the tree. She stared at the two baby birds. *I almost don't want to kill them.* She thought sorrowfully, closing her eyes as she grabbed the nestlings, dispatching them and quickly hopping down from branch to branch until her paws met the damp forest floor.

Tumblesoar's chin was tucked close to his chest in order to safely carry the eggs back to the Clan. He looked odd, with his face scrunched close to his neck like a disgruntled owl, and Hopepaw couldn't help but let a smile cross her muzzle for a brief moment like the sun passing through a patch of clouds.

A few moments passed in silence before her mentor spoke. "Your warrior assessment will be soon; you'll *finally* get your full name! Aren't you excited?" *A warrior... My warrior name...* She felt a fleeting flash of excitement shoot through her before a thought crushed it again. *Screechpaw should be getting his name with me. He talked endlessly about what he thought it would be. He deserves it more.*

It's not fair. Sensing her change in mood, concern crossed her mentor's face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're missing Screechpaw, aren't you? You can talk about it. I'm a good listener." For an instant, Hopepaw was tempted. Anger and sorrow and anguish and conflict were all gathered in the pit of her stomach, brewing and gathering like the storm that had rocked the mountains just hours before. But, she pushed the feelings down, feeling worse. "No. I'm fine."

"Hopepaw, you shouldn't bottle up what you're feeling. It's not good for you."

"You can't make me do anything."

"I can't, but-"

"Just leave me alone! *Nothing* I can say can make you understand what I'm feeling. You haven't lost the one cat that loved you, that appreciated you, that made you feel like you weren't a complete waste of time and space. Screechpaw is *gone*; no little conversation can bring him back, so what's the use?"

Angry tears stung Hopepaw's mismatched eyes, and she turned away from Tumblesoar, walking brusquely away. A lump clogged her throat, and she fought back the wave of tears that threatened to stop her in her tracks. "Hopepaw, wait." She looked back, to see the tall blue tom sitting calmly, a serious expression written across his muzzle. "Sit down."

Something about how his voice was both stoic and pained at the same time made Hopepaw reluctantly pad toward him, and sit down across from him. She couldn't look him in the eye. "I had a best friend. Her name was Soaringpaw."

"What does that have to do with-"

"We were like the sun and the moon. She was graceful and strong, and smart. I was awkward and skinny and clumsy. She had the most beautiful white coat and the biggest hazel eyes I'd ever seen. We

were both only kits, and we basically just adopted each other as siblings. I looked up to her more than any cat has ever looked up to anything or anyone; I wanted to be just like her. I'd go out at night to train in the trees so I'd get more graceful. I'd eat more so I would be just as big as her. And she was never offended or put off; she always wanted to do what was best for me and help me be the best cat I could be. She was a pure soul, and I truly loved her."

A bittersweet nostalgia made his eyes bright as he spoke. "We decided to take our assessments at the same time. We wanted to do it at night, and so we did; but the moment the sun sank below the horizon, and the orange sunset dulled into dusk, everything went so wrong." Pain flickered through his eyes, and he drew a deep breath.

"It was almost Snowgone, night, and we couldn't find more than a mouse. So, Soaringpaw suggested we go further up the mountain to look for snow hares. I followed her dutifully. But when we made it up, we didn't find any hares. We found death itself. You see, wolves sometimes come into our territory in Snowgone, and Leafloss. Their territory runs out of prey, and they search ours. But *no one told us*."

He stopped for a moment, eyes glittering. "Right in our path, there was a massive grey wolf. Ten times the size of you, or me. Soaringpaw, swift and a good runner, tried to lead it away. But the wolf went for me. I froze- couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, and I could see my life flashing before my eyes. Just as it was about to close its jaws around me, Soaringpaw threw her body in front of me. I can still hear..." His voice broke. "I can still hear the sound it made when the wolf snapped her spine."

"Tumblesoar-" Hopepaw whispered. She could almost smell the anguish he was feeling, just telling the story.

"I didn't know what to do. I was *so* scared. I raked the wolf's eyes and it, by some miracle, left, having had enough of the fight. But Soaringpaw... She couldn't stand. She was fading in and out of consciousness, and her back legs and flanks were completely limp. The last thing she said before she left me, was: "I'll see you in the stars, brother."

Tumblesoar's green eyes shone with unspilt tears. "I asked for my

warrior name to be Tumblesoar; after her. Then, only two, maybe four moons later, your father, my half-brother, died trying to find food for your mother. That loss stung too; we weren't as close as Soaringpaw and I had been, but he was still my brother. And then you and your brothers were born. Everyone seemed to forget Ashenwater and focus all their energy completely on keeping the new kits fed. It hurt to see him forgotten so soon, but I understood, and I'm not bitter. When I got the chance to mentor you, I jumped at it; I wanted to make sure you flourished. You remind me *so much* of Soaringpaw- she was a bit of a smart-mouth too. That's why I was a bit too tough at the start. I didn't want to see you get hurt."

"I'm so sorry, Tumblesoar. I don't know what I was thinking, I was just really... I don't know. I shouldn't have said what I did."

"It's okay. My point is, *every* cat in this Clan, including you and me, has lost someone they love at some point in their life. They still miss them every day. In fact, it will be the anniversary of her death in a few short moons. But we've moved on and tried to become the best cats we can be. Don't judge someone before you know their story." He blinked the sheen of tears out of his eyes and stood up.

"Come on, it'll be getting dark soon. The Clan will be missing us." He called, padding away with the eggs clamped under his chin once again.

Hopepaw's thoughts whirled in her head. Tumblesoar's story had left her feeling shaken; he always seemed to cheerful and happy, even when he'd lost his best friend. *How*? But at the same time, knowing someone else had gone through grief like she had was almost comforting; she almost felt a bit less lonely. Grabbing the two nestlings she'd dropped in the initial argument, she followed her mentor, a new respect burned into her heart for him. *Maybe I can move on too.*

Fun Fact: Tumblesoar and Ashenwater had a 14-moon age difference!

The Start of the Assesement

[image]

Bluepaw and Hopepaw being siblings, lol. Art by me!

"Your warrior assessments are tomorrow," Tumblesoar announced, gaze wandering over Bluepaw and Hopepaw as they sat in front of him, and Bluepaw's mentor, Pinestalk. "When do you two want to take them?"
"Day," both apprentices answered instantly, and confidently. Bluepaw shot a venom-laced glare at his sister. "I said it first," he hissed through tightly gritted teeth, lips curled up menacingly. Hopepaw started at him, unamused. "We said it at the same time, pigeon-brain."

Pinestalk sighed and shook his head. "Both of you can take it in the daytime. You two are siblings. Can't you act like it for, like half a second? Please? Stars and sky, you two are at each other's throats like wolves. Pointedly, Hopepaw turned away from the taller blue tom, who rolled his eyes.

"Good enough. You both will take your assessments starting at dawn and ending as soon as the sun sets. You have to gather as much prey as possible in that time. Get a good sleep, eat before you leave in the morning, and set out early to make sure you have lots of time." Pinestalk paused for a moment before continuing.

"There are a few rules. One, you may not start until the sun clears the horizon, and you must be on the cliff at sunset with your prey—two, no crossing any borders. Three, any prey that is already dead is off-limits. And, no accepting prey from passing patrols. Four, if another cat is stalking a piece of prey, it is theirs; not yours. And five- you can't eat the prey you gather." Hopepaw nodded, and so did Bluepaw.

"Tumblesoar and I will be watching at all times. If you break a rule, we will see," he meowed, voice stern. "Mistakes happen, but just

know we have full control over whether you become warriors or not. Dismissed!"
With a flick of his bushy dark ginger tail, Pinestalk padded away. Tumblesoar nodded to the two apprentices, before doing the same.

Bluepaw let out one more ill-tempered growl and stalked toward the prey hole. Hopepaw, having already eaten earlier in the evening, headed straight for her nest. For the hotter season, she'd tossed her rabbit pelt out, instead filling the nest with cool leaves, flower petals and a few feathers in order to not overheat. But now, as the weather cooled at night, she realized she ought to get her warmer bedding back.

Hopepaw curled into her nest, snugly pressed into it. She was nearly outgrowing it. After closing her eyes, tossing and turning, and circling and re-adjusting herself many times, she found that she couldn't sleep.

Ever since Screechpaw's death, nearly three moons prior, Hopepaw's sleep had never been good. Her nightmares had quieted until they only occurred once in a while, but she had trouble falling asleep and staying asleep. She often either overslept after a night of insomnia or woke up much too early for no apparent reason. I need to rest before my assessment. She thought urgency creeping into her mind. If I'm half asleep all day, I'll fail. She squeezed her eyes tighter shut and forced her breathing to steady and slow down.

But just as she felt the weightless tug of sleep pulling at her limbs, beaconing her to drift away, Bluepaw stomped loudly into the Apprentice's den. Hopepaw side-eyed him as he settled in his nest. For a moment, he said nothing, and she resumed her attempt to sleep. Then, as soon as she closed her eyes, he spoke. "Stay away from me tomorrow."
"What?"
"I said, stay away from me. I can't have you messing up my hunting."
"Like I'd ever want to be around you," Hopepaw scoffed. "You're about as fun to talk to as a wolverine with nettles up its-"
"Shut it."
"You're the one who started this conversation. Have fun with your hunt; I'm sure whatever you catch will impress *Emeraldshatter."* She

drawled, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Bluepaw huffed and turned away from his sister. Mercifully, when she closed her eyes again, sleep folded its ebony wings around her, and swept her out into a dreamless slumber.

Just before dawn, Tumblesoar woke Hopepaw and Bluepaw up. Hopepaw felt almost jittery with nerves; before this moment, she hadn't thought much about her assessment. Hadn't cared. Had pushed it to the back of her mind. But now, reality hit her straight in the muzzle. Today was her warrior assessment. Objectively, one of the most important days of her life.

She pushed past Tumblesoar and headed to the fresh-kill hole. There, last night's prey lay stale and musty in the stone dip, and Hopepaw wrinkled her nose. The freshest thing there looked to be a squirrel, so she grabbed it and settled down to quickly eat. The sun would be breaking the horizon any minute, and she needed all the time she could possibly get. *Hunting isn't my strong suit*, she thought. *I just hope I can catch some decent stuff.*

As she gulped down the squirrel, she didn't hear the pawsteps as they hit the stone behind her. "Hopepaw?" Gentlebreeze's soft voice filled her ears, and Hopepaw nearly jumped. She turned her head and saw her mother, eyes bright with excitement and pride. "Good luck today," she mewed. "Thanks, Mother." Gentlebreeze let out a sigh and touched her nose to her daughter's forehead. "I'm proud of you, Hopepaw. You're so strong; you've overcome so much before you've even received your warrior name. It's... unreal. I know you'll pass."
"I hope so."
"You will." She insisted. Before Hopepaw could answer, Tumblesoar called out to her. "Hopepaw, it's nearly dawn! Your assessment will start soon." She swallowed the last of the squirrel and stood up, padding toward her mentor. Tumblesoar looked more nervous than Hopepaw felt, switching his weight from paw to paw, eyes darting. Bluepaw, neatly groomed and acting haughty as usual, met them near the tunnel with his mentor by his side. The two warriors nodded to each other and began the ascent out of camp.

A chill whispered through Hopepaw's fur as she stood, waiting for

the sun to rise. The sky was ghostly gray, and tinged with delicate pink near the horizon, the heavens streaked with a rosy glow, the colour the wild roses had been before the change of the season had withered their silken petals. Tumblesoar repeated the rules again, making sure both apprentices could recite them before finally falling silent. For a moment, Hopepaw wondered why he was so nervous- then, she remembered his story about Soaringpaw. She had died on her assessment day, in Leafloss; The anniversary of her untimely demise was probably only around two moons away.

After a few painful minutes of waiting, the sun broke the distant horizon, a ball of crimson flame. "Remember the rules!" Tumblesoar cried as Hopepaw fled down the mountain, Bluepaw close to her paws. The cool morning air filled her lungs and ran through her long cream-coloured fur like water. She felt as though she could fly, paws skimming the ground. So faint that she could barely hear it, Tumblesoar's voice hailed one last plea before any hope of hearing him was lost.

"*Be careful...*"

Fun Fact: From BleakClan's camp, down to their border, it's a 20-40 minute trip, depending on travelling speed. The mountain they reside on is not incredibly tall, and they do not live at the very peak; their camp is on one of the smaller peaks. The whole territories of all four Clans are high in elevation.

Sorry about the short chapter, and the infrequent updates! I've been away.

Overshadowed

[image]

Hopepaw above! Art by Me!

As Leafloss season settled into the forests, meadows, lakes, and mountains, the sun started to set earlier and rise later. The leaves on the trees transformed from a vibrant green to a beautiful blend of soft gold, crimson, brown, and orange, creating a tortoiseshell-like pattern. Mornings were chilly, and the first frost of the season- although mild, and quick to melt- had already withered delicate foliage and flowers.

Hopepaw found that she quite liked this new season. With its colors and tones that matched her pelt, allowing her to creep more easily through the undergrowth and the lessened heat, it was pretty enjoyable.

As she sped down the mountain and into the forest, the distance between herself and Bluepaw grew. *If I don't see him until sundown, it'd still be too soon.* She thought, slowing down as light began to stream through the withering canopy of leaves. She scented the air and through the aroma of damp leaves and the medley of a Leafloss forest, she could faintly smell a squirrel.

Tracking it proved to be easy, and she found the russet-furred creature quickly. It was sitting at the base of a gnarled old oak, chewing an acorn busily. *Easy,* Hopepaw gloated to herself, and launched off the forest floor, landing with a thump just short of the squirrel. It scrambled for a moment, allowing Hopepaw to grab it and draw the struggling prey toward herself, ending its life with a quick nip to the throat.

Her paws stung from the clumsy landing, but pride flooded her as she stared at the squirrel. It was a fine piece of prey, plump and large. And, a good start to her assessment. Confidant, Hopepaw buried her first catch in a pile of leaves and ferns and continued on her hunt. *This assessment will be as easy as taking a mossball from a*

day-old kit!

~❄~

Hunting proved to not be as easy as she'd originally thought. The sun was nearing its highest point in the sky, and a hungry, frustrated Hopepaw only had a single squirrel to show for her work. She had almost caught a jackdaw, but it had seen her at the last moment and took flight, its raucous alarm call scaring off every other piece of potential prey. The day had turned unusually hot, for Leafloss, and Hopepaw was sweltering. She sat down heavily. This would be a lot better if I had Screechpaw with me...

For the first time in days, the old bitter guilt surged through her, and she realized she'd been blocking her grief for a while. Guilt for the accident that she possibly could have prevented and guilt for the fact that her brother would never receive his Medicine cat name made her heart heavy.

Her mood soured, Hopepaw continued on her fruitless search for prey.

~❄~

Energy surged through Hopepaw as she struck out, knocking the sparrow from its frantic flight, and slamming it onto the ground. Her second catch of the day. It seemed that her luck had turned, and the bounce returned to her step, as the silken-furred apprentice buried her prey and kept searching.

Even though she now had two pieces of prey, the sun was gradually sinking lower in the sky, causing Hopepaw to worry. She quickened her pace, nose held high in the air searching for scents. But instead of prey, the aroma of two Clans- Her own Clan, and their greatest enemy, EmberClan filled the air the further she walked. And with the scent, came voices, raised and angry from near the border. She couldn't make out many words, but it was clear that there was something wrong.

Heart pounding, Hopepaw crept through a stand of juniper bushes and watched through the thin waxen leaves as two patrols stood

nose to nose. She recognized Lynxfury, Darkdaisy, Witheredcry, and Brookspirit from BleakClan, and Flickerstar, Rubypaw -now presumably a warrior- and three other warriors who she didn't know from EmberClan.

Flickerstar's blazing amber eyes were locked with Lynxfury's imposing, muscular frame towering over Lynxflight's smaller, more compact form. She was trying hard to look confident, but anxiety showed in her gaze- BleakClan was outnumbered.

"This has gone on *too long*, Lynxfury," Flickerstar hissed. "This ends tomorrow, at the gathering. We meet an agreement, or I declare war."

"Not if I call war first!" Lynxfury snarled, sending a sneer onto Flickerstar's muzzle. "You're not special. Your Clan dies either way. Now, run back to your worm of a leader, and tell him that he'd better be ready to submit before it gets..." He drew a claw across his throat, mockingly. "*Messy*." With that, the patrol of EmberClan warriors turned, disappearing into the brush.

Shaken, the BleakClan patrol stood for a moment, murmuring amongst themselves, before running toward the camp, leaving Hopepaw confused and alone. The exchange between patrols had only lasted a minute at most, but it felt like she'd been holding her breath for a moon.

She shook off any questions and kept walking, but the more she walked, the more she thought, and the more she thought, the more dire the situation seemed. Snowfall season was quickly approaching, the most disease-ridden and death-fulled time for BleakClan. Herbs were *incredibly* hard to find, and prey was always scarce enough to cause starvation. War in Snowfall would mean injuries using up valuable herbs. The lack of prey would mean no warrior would have energy. No energy meant injured or sick cats couldn't recover; it would be a complete and utter disaster.

And Hopepaw knew her leader; He was brave, and kind, and wise, but also very proud. He wouldn't give in unless the Clan was on the edge of collapse. And by then, it could be too late. Apprehension spiked in her chest; She didn't think she could handle any more

death. Even from cats she barely knew.

But, there was no time to worry; Dusk was drawing closer.

~❁~

Crimson, pink, and gold stretched like the feathers of some grand bird across the sky, and Hopepaw collected her latest, and last catch of the day; a magpie. The bird had been distractedly picking at the corpse of a fish on the banks of the creek, and Hopepaw had been able to sneak up on it, and, with a mercifully simple struggle, kill it. Now, she had her squirrel, sparrow, *and* magpie.

She felt confident that her trio of catches would be enough; Tumblesoar knew she wasn't incredible at hunting. His expectations would likely be relatively low. However, a small, hateful part of her hoped Bluepaw, somehow, had failed. It would certainly knock his ego down a notch.

With the sky steadily darkening, jaws heavy with prey, and nose clogged with fur and feathers, she hauled herself up the mountain toward camp. When she reached the cliff in front of the cave entrance, Bluepaw, Pinestalk, and Tumblesoar were already standing there. Bluepaw had *five* pieces of prey, and Pinestalk's pride showed in every word he spoke.

Heads turned as Hopepaw dropped her catches and her paws, and stood waiting. Tumblesoar padded over, giving his apprentice a nod of approval. "Well done, Hopepaw! Three pieces. That squirrel's a fine specimen- it'll feed all the elders." But Hopepaw hardly heard his praise. *Five? How in the stars did Bluepaw get five pieces of prey?*

The two mentors led their apprentices down into the camp, where cats sat all over the place, waiting with ears pricked. All eyes went immediately to Bluepaw, his two mice, rabbit, and squirrel overshadowing Hopepaw's prey. Gentlebreeze was one of the only cats who looked equally proud of both of her kits- But as Hopepaw's gaze searched the crowd, confusion prickled at her pelt when she saw Harepad, the blind and mostly-deaf elder staring intently at the smaller apprentice, milky eyes as bright as the moon. She shifted uncomfortably. *It's almost like she can see me.*

Adderstar bounded into the center of camp, eyes lighting up in approval. "Cats of BleakClan, gather at the Sacred Cliff for the making of two new warriors!" Hopepaw followed the rush of pelts, in a daze. She couldn't register that finally, after moons and moons of heartbreak and uncertainty, and hard work, she'd finally be a warrior. But her mind lingered on one thought, that seemed to tap incessantly on her brain, like a woodpecker in a tree. Screechpaw should be here. He'd be here if it weren't for But before she could think any final thoughts, the chill of dusk air slapped her in the muzzle. As she walked, she wondered what her warrior name would be. What she wanted it to be. Then, suddenly, she knew.

She and Bluepaw took their places at the edge of the cliff, in front of Adderstar, mountain breeze whipping her fur to, and fro. "Pinestalk, has your apprentice learned the meaning of our noble code?"

"He has." Turning to Bluepaw, Adderstar's intense blue gaze drilled into the young tom. "Bluepaw, state the seven most important rules of the code in order," Without hesitation, he rattled off the first five, and with little more difficulty, the last two. Adderstar nodded approvingly. "Good. Pinestalk, has your apprentice learned what it means to be a warrior, and all the necessary skills needed to serve his Clan?"

"He has."

"Then, Bluepaw, I hail you by your new name; Bluehawk. With the fierce spirit of a hawk and the heart of a true warrior, I honor you for your bravery." He laid a paw on Bluehawk's shoulder, and Bluehawk dipped his head, eyes blazing as he searched the crowd, gaze alighting on Emeraldshatter. Then, he stepped back and Adderstar turned to Hopepaw.

"Tumblesoar, has your apprentice learned the meaning of our noble code?" Eyes shining, Tumblesoar nodded fervently. "She has."

"Hopepaw, please recite the seven most important rules of the Warrior Code." Hopepaw hadn't explicitly studied the rules before the ceremony- there'd been no time. But, Bluehawk's speel had given her all she needed.

"Warriors may not give up the lifestyle of a warrior, to take up residence in the home of a Twoleg. Cats may not kill or injure their Clanmates or kin, unless in self-defense. The life of a kit is the most Sacred, beautiful form of life, and they are to be protected at any cost, no matter their Clan or the crimes their kin may have committed." She paused for breath, before continuing.

"Borders are to be respected at all times. Gatherings are a Sacred time, conflict and combat is forbidden. A cat can only have a romantic or... Physical relationship with a cat of their own Clan. When taking a warrior name, said cat pledges loyalty to their Clan and code." She finished with a flick of her tail, thanking her memory.

Adderstar smiled. "Tumblesoar, has your apprentice learned what it means to be a warrior, and every skill needed to protect and serve her Clan?" Tumblesoar's voice shook with pride. "Yes, she certainly has."

But before Adderstar could say anything, Hopepaw interrupted him. "Adderstar, I have a request." Mutters and gasps arose from the gathered Clan, and Hopepaw saw her mother's eyes widen with anxiety. Adderstar looked skeptical. "Go on..."

"I'd like my name to be Hopescreech- after Screechpaw. He should be standing here with me, and he was taken from us far too soon. I'd like to honor him for the rest of my life, with my name."

Adderstar almost looked like he was considering it for a moment. But, shook his head. "A warrior's name is decided by their leader. Not the warrior."

"But Adderstar-"

"No. If every warrior chose their name, then the warrior ceremony would be useless. The leader chooses the name that they know fits the apprentice they're naming; We put *a lot* of thought into it."

"Tumblesoar named himself after Soaringpaw, why can't I?"

"*I* chose to name him after Soaringpaw. Because it was not only

honorable but showed his growth as a cat. Now, if you would please step back, and let me continue." Hopepaw, pelt hot with embarrassment and anger, closed her mouth and waited.

"As I was saying; Hopepaw, I hail you by your new name, Hopewilt. A flower has to wilt before it can flourish and bear fruit, just like how you pulled through all the loss in your life and came back stronger. And I'm *sure*, that later in life, you will blossom into a formidable warrior. I honor you for your strong will."

Cheers finally erupted from the Clan, and dozens of pairs of eyes shone from the half-dark below the two new warriors. Hopewilt rolled her new name around on her tongue; it wasn't what she'd expected. Nor what she'd wanted. But it wasn't terrible- It sounded fierce and strong. And for that, she was happy.

The Clan milled around, congratulating both siblings- but she heard far more praise for Bluehawk than herself. It was obvious that talking back to Adderstar hadn't been a good choice. She expected Gentlebreeze to be ashamed, but instead, the cream-and-gray queen wrapped her paws around her grown daughter's neck, locking her in a tearful embrace. "I'm *so proud* of you, Hopewilt."

"But I talked back to Adderstar- I interrupted the ceremony."

"That doesn't matter. All that matters is that you're a warrior now- you've made it. After everything. I know how hard you worked. And Screechpaw would be proud too." She released Hopewilt and nodded toward Adderstar. "But now, I think you and Bluehawk should talk to him about your watch; the first night that a warrior carries their name, they protect the Camp. And we sure need it now that EmberClan is being so hostile."

Sure enough, Adderstar was adamant about the watch. Once both warriors had eaten, they were sent up to the tunnel's entrance. A chill settled into Hopewilt's fur, and she sat, fur poofed out to ward off the cold, Bluehawk crouching statically across from her.

And, thus, the first night of being a warrior began.

Fun Fact: If Screechpaw had gotten his Medicine cat name, it

would have been Screechcedar or Screechcinder.

Hooo, this was a long chapter- I'm sorry it took so long to come out! What do you think will happen next?

Betrayed by Blood

[image]

A lore scene for what lies below in this chapter; Be warned, that this particular chapter contains lots of angst, a pretty big twist, descriptions of blood, and brief mentions of suicide.

A cold, Leafloss wind swept across the ridges and rocks of BleakClan's mountain, chilling Hopewilt and Bluehawk to the bones. The moon was climbing sleepily up its dusky ladder, seeming to drag its step with two pairs of eyes trained on it.

Hopewilt shivered, and fluffed her silky fur even more than it had been before, edging away from the rockface she'd been leaning on; it had lost the warmth it had absorbed during the heat of the day and was now freezing. She looked over to Bluehawk, who was staring stonily into the distance, sleek blue-gray fur bushed out.

Hopewilt was terribly bored; The night seemed to be so much longer than it had ever been before, more tedious than all the nights she'd lay awake after her nightmares, waiting for dawn. She cleared her throat. "So... Are you happy with your name?" Bluehawk side-eyed his sister. "Sure." His response was clipped and short, edged with a chill that a stranger from an enemy Clan might have when addressing his foe. "Mine wasn't what I expected," she continued, trying to get some sort of conversation going. "But I like it. It's nice."

"Why are you talking to me?"

"Jeez- I was just trying to be civil. We're warriors now, not immature kits."

"We've been warriors for a few hours. Stop acting all high-and-mighty."

"I-" Annoyed, she huffed and moved slightly away from him. *Fine, then. Be rude.* "Now that you're a warrior, you're going to be taking

Emeraldshatter as a mate?" It was more of a statement than a question, and Hopewilt already knew the answer. His ears pinned slightly. "For your information, yes. I'm taking her as mine tomorrow, and there's *nothing* you can do to stop me."

"Wouldn't dream of it." She scoffed sarcastically. "Have fun, then."

"You're just mad because there's no tom in this Clan that would ever want *you* as their mate." His voice took on a malicious, bitter tone, and Hopewilt reeled back in surprise at the dig at her personal life. He was right, in that she'd never been truly interested in any cat in her Clan, she-cat, or tom. She just didn't connect with anyone in that way, and besides, the only other young-ish cat in the Clan was Beartooth. And they'd barely even ever spoke. But why was he being so mean?

"Bluehawk, what *happened* to us? We're *siblings*, for stars' sake! We share the same blood, slept in the same nest, played the same games- Now we hardly talk, and when we do, we're at each other's throats like wolves!"

"We grew up," Bluehawk sniffed. "I found Emeraldshatter, you found Screechpaw. Simple as that."

"Screechpaw's been dead for moons- or did you even notice? When I was at death's paws, depressed out of my mind and delirious with fever, you didn't check on me *once*- Heck, did you even notice when I lost my tail? No, because you were too busy, following that stuck-up, awful, sorry excuse for a she-cat!" Past trying to be civil, or talk like 'warriors', Hopewilt felt fury rise in her chest, finally pouring out all the repressed feelings of being ignored. But she received no apology or sympathy.

Bluehawk's lips curled up in a snarl, and his claws dug into the stone of the cliff. "Why would I have checked on you? You killed our brother- I may have not been close to him, but I still loved him- *more than I'll ever love you*."

"I didn't kill him!" Her voice broke to a sob, and panic gripped her body, making her breath come in gasps. "I didn't, and you know it!"

Tension hung in the air, dark as a storm and itching to break. Soon, Hopewilt's mind flipped from panic, back to fury. "You know what? I'm done explaining myself to you. I don't care if you're miserable for the rest of your life- Because all you are is an egotistical, cruel,"

"SHUT *UP*!"

"Crow-food-eating liar, and if you died tomorrow, *I wouldn't even care*-"

In an instant, agony flashed across Hopewilt's face, sending her to her knees. Hot crimson spilled down across her cream-coloured fur, one eye stuck shut with blood. Bluehawk's eyes blazed with a mixture of anger and hurt, as he stared coldly down at a cat he'd once considered his kin. His claws dug even deeper into the unforgiving stone beneath him. "I said, *SHUT UP*!" he hissed, his voice laced with a venomous rage that sent a shiver down Hopewilt's spine.

Lifting her paw to her face, she traced a long furrow from her brow to just under the bags of her left eye. Shaking with shock and pain, she opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. The world was tinted scarlet, and though, mercifully, she could still see through both of her eyes, one refused to stay open, weighed down by the sticky crimson pooling in it. As she struggled to grasp what had happened, the world started to spin.

"Y-you tried to blind me." Bluehawk didn't respond, blood- his sister's blood- beading on the fur around his muzzle, and right paw.

The night fell silent again as Hopewilt struggled to her paws, her entire body trembling. "You could have killed me- your kin! Your flesh-and-blood!" She cried, voice raw and breaking. "*I. Don't. Care.*" Bluehawk's expression was deadpan. "I am not your *kin*. Not your *littermate*. Not your flesh and blood. We may have the same mother, but we will *never* be siblings again." He leaned down closer to Hopewilt, hardly flinching at the scent of blood on the air, at the sight of her crouched on the stone, blood marring her features beyond recognition. "Understand?"

"You're a *monster,*" She screamed, not caring if her Clan heard.

"That's just fine with me! I never want to see you again! In a fit of rage, she tried to strike out at him, but she missed, and he scoffed. "Pathetic. Get out of my sight."

Blood and tears blurring her vision, the world a sickening blur of black and crimson, she stumbled down the cliffside, tripping repeatedly as sobs of horror and pain wracked her body. An owl let out its ghostly cry above her head, and the woosh of wings skimmed above her head. She knew not where she was going, nor what would happen when she got there, but anywhere was better than back in a Clan where she had no littermates, no one besides her mother who loved her, and so many pairs of prying eyes asking questions.

The rocks faded into grass and bushes, and the sounds of a forest at night rang in her ears. She stumbled into a fragrant-smelling bush, and fell to her side, dizzy and sick with panic. It seemed like she'd been running for hours, time-warped so badly that the only tell of how long she'd been running before collapsing, was the blood beginning to dry on her wound, and the adrenaline wearing off to give way to searing agony.

When her breathing finally slowed to a heavy pant, and she no longer felt like she was going to pass out, she sat up. The bush she'd found herself in was a large Antlerberry bush- the most toxic plant in the mountains. She remembered that, as a young apprentice, she'd been chastised for smelling the blossoms. Now, the berries were plump and ripe, their yellow-and-red speckled skins gleaming in the pale light that shone through the branches. They were obviously hearty plants, and the thick leaves had shielded the fruit from the frost.

She used her claws to slice one off of its stem, watching it fall to the ground in front of her. Taunting her. For a frightening moment, she contemplated eating it- her troubles gone in an instant. A few seconds of pain, then eternal bliss, with Screechpaw by her side. She picked the berry up... And set it down again. Some deep instinct was wailing in her head to stop- and she listened.

The moon was past its highest point in the sky, and cold crept into her bones as she crouched on the ground in the dark. Despair

overwhelmed her entire body, making tears spring to her eyes once again. She felt so alone. No friends, no lover, no littermates, only her mother and other distant kin back in the camp, blissfully unaware of what had transpired.

She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling the crust of blood over her eye and all over her face prickle as it dried. Completely exhausted, and willing for the pain to finally go away, she slipped away into a nightmare-filled, cold, restless sleep.

Fun Fact: Antlerberries are a completely fictional plant, made up for the purpose of this story. They're deadly to kits, the weak and sick, and the very elderly, and incredibly dangerous to even healthy cats. In cases of chronic pain, a cat will sometimes choose to take one of these berries to end their suffering; The symptoms of ingestion include foaming at the mouth, seizures, uncontrollable rolling of the eyes, vomiting, paralysis, and death within minutes. The only cure for a small amount, if caught on time, is Yarrow. They bloom in early Snowmelt and bear fruit until late Leafloss, in which case they shrivel up and fall to the ground.

Excuses

[image]

Bluehawk and Emeraldshatter

A fair warning, this chapter's going to be pretty long. A lot is happening, and there just wasn't a good place to segway into the next chapter! Enjoy!

Frost covered Hopewilt's pelt, masking the blood that had dried there into a shimmery sheen of silver. Her entire body ached like she'd been thrown off of a cliff, and her mouth felt as if it was filled with sand. The wound over her eye had scabbed, but when she blinked, stabs of dull pain shot through it.

With a groan, she sat up and peered outside the bush where she'd apparently spent the whole night. The world was tinged with frost, and the air tingled with cold—a little taste of Snowfall season. Dawn had spread its flaming eye over the forest, and Hopewilt guessed that the first patrols of the morning had already set out.

Panic lit in her heart, as she realized that she was supposed to still be standing guard; there would be questions as to where she'd gone during the night, and Hopewilt doubted she could answer them. The memories of the night before were a haze of tears, blood, hate-filled words, blinding pain, and a bond that could never and would never be repaired.

Shaking off the frost and lingering heartache, she trotted out of the bush and sat down to carefully preen her fur back to its usual golden shine, but quickly gave up, as her muscles screamed in protest. Hopewilt sighed- She didn't want to return to her Clan. Nobody, even the tiniest kit or the most feeble elder could miss the giant scar that now marred her face.

I could tell the Clan... Tell them their dear, loyal, brave Bluehawk brutally attacked his sister. Tell them that I was nearly blinded. Tell them he's a traitor. But something caught her in the middle of her

twisted fantasy. *If he didn't hesitate to hurt me once, he won't hesitate to hurt me again. Just to keep the truth from coming out.* Hopewilt contemplated her options for a minute. There didn't seem to be a happy ending. Expose him, cause so much turmoil for the Clan, and put herself in danger, or stay silent and live with it?

I'll decide once I get back, She thought with a flick of her stubby tail. *Excuses can suffice for now.*

~❁~

As she drew closer to camp, Hopewilt began to hear voices. Quietly, she crept up and peeked over the lip of the cliff in front of the entrance. There, the Clan was gathered in front of Adderstar, as he talked. The air was filled with tension, and when Hopewilt stepped out into the crowd of cats, heads turned to stare at her.

Adderstar paused. "Hopewilt- Where were you this morning? You were supposed to be standing guard. And what happened to your face?" Hopewilt took a deep breath, the excuse she'd made up standing at the tip of her tongue. "Well, I thought I'd go out hunting just before dawn, and bring back something for the prey pile. But an owl caught me on the way back to its nest and attacked me. I fought it off and hid until I was sure it was gone. Then I came back..." She trailed off as her gaze caught Bluehawk's. He looked so smug, so cruel, so evil. Emeraldshatter was glued to his side as always, her plumy tail twined with his.

She swallowed hard and stared at the ground, heart pounding frantically with nonsensical panic. "And... Now I'm here."

"Well, then. You're a warrior now, but that doesn't mean you can run off and do whatever you want, whenever you want. After the meeting, go and see Frostedmoss for that scratch." He raised a paw to disperse the murmuring of the Clan and continued.

"As I was saying, tonight is the Gathering. For moons, EmberClan has been harassing us, taking our prey, attacking patrols, and jeering at us from behind their borders. Tonight, if we are not able to come to an agreement and make peace, there will be *war* by dawn." Hopewilt's eyes widened. War? I didn't think this had gone that far.

"I will be bringing the majority of the Clan to the gathering tonight. We must show them we are strong in numbers, and not afraid to fight. Try not to engage with them or make them mad; to achieve peace, we must also be peaceful. The list of who will be coming, and the few warriors that will be staying, will be announced by the end of the day. Dismissed!"

As soon as the word 'dismissed' had been uttered, Frostedmoss came running to Hopewilt, concern written all over his aging, gray-and-white patched face. "Come to my den- I need to take a look at that." Wordlessly, Hopewilt followed, down into the dim, warm underground camp, glowing lichen brushing her back as she slipped into the cave that held the Medicine Den. She sat stiffly on the chilly stone, tense as he held glowing lichen up to the long, crimson furrow, parting her fur and picking away dried blood.

Frostedmoss glanced at Hopewilt, his gaze intense. She shifted uncomfortably. "How did you say this happened again?"

"Uh- an owl. I was out early, and it caught me on the way back to its nest. It tried to grab me, but I fought it off, and escaped with just this." She motioned to the wound. Frostedmoss nodded, obviously skeptical.

"Let me tell you something. When I was still an apprentice, *seasons* ago, a snowy owl terrorized BleakClan for a few moons. Three cats were attacked- Two warriors, and an apprentice. One got a wound across their shoulders, one got it near their flank, and one, the apprentice, was blinded, and later died of the resulting infection. He was the first cat I ever lost as a Medicine Cat." The old Medicine cat's gaze darkened momentarily.

"But that's not the point; All of their wounds had something in common. They were relatively shallow, smooth, and thin, and came in rows of three or four. This wound looks more like something dealt by a warrior's claw."

He paused for a second, waiting for a reaction. Hopewilt tried to remain deadpan, but inside, she was panicking. "This wound is jagged and deep. I've seen enough battle injuries to know the difference between blunt-force trauma, claw wounds, wounds from

birds of prey, and wounds from animals like foxes, wolves, and coyotes. Hopewilt, *who did this to you*? Did you get in a border skirmish?"

Hopewilt stepped back, tripping over her own paws slightly. "Like I said. It was just an owl. It must have been... a weird angle." Frostedmoss sighed at her response, easily picking out that she was most likely lying.

"I woke up late last night because something had disturbed me. When I left my den and looked up into the tunnel, I could hear a *very* heated argument. Coincidentally, there were only two cats standing guard last night. You, and Bluehawk. I only caught the tail end of it, but I heard what sounded like a she-cat, in pain, scream, "You're a monster!" And flee. I crept up to the mouth of the tunnel, and only saw Bluehawk, pacing and muttering under his breath. Did *Bluehawk* do this to you?"

Hopewilt's heart hammered frantically in her chest. She yearned to just tell Frostedmoss everything; she trusted him, and he already practically knew the truth. But something held her back. She was afraid, of what would happen to her, and to Frostedmoss if she let the truth out. Bluehawk obviously didn't care if she lived or died; he wouldn't hesitate to hurt Frostedmoss. After the elderly Medicine Cat had done so much for her- save her life, even- she couldn't risk him getting hurt.

"No, it was an owl." She stated stubbornly. Frostedmoss looked disappointed. "Okay. I can't push you any further. It doesn't matter what happened, all that matters is that it doesn't get infected, you don't lose your sight, and you're okay." Internally, Hopewilt breathed a massive sigh of relief. *Thank the stars.*

"Now," Frostedmoss meowed briskly, rummaging around in his herb stores. "Let's get a dressing on that."

~❄~

"Lynxfury, Wolfwhisper, Beartooth, Darkdaisy, Pinestalk, Witheredcry, Batwhistle, Flurryflank, Thawedsnow, Bluehawk, Tumblesoar, Gentlebreeze, Emeraldshatter, Brookspirit, and

Hopewilt; all of you will be coming with me to the gathering tonight."

A chorus of happy exclamations filled the camp, along with a few groans of disappointment. "Wailingwind, Coldcloud, and Frostedmoss, you three will be staying, along with the elders. If a patrol of sneaky warriors manages to get to our camp and invade while we're gone, you need to be able to run for help or fight them off. Frostedmoss, I need you to prepare herbs and emergency bundles. We could be fighting at dawn." Accepting their new responsibilities, the six cats that would remain in camp all nodded.

"Can I stay up top and keep a lookout, Adderstar?" Asked Coldcloud, her amber eyes shining like coals in the dim of the camp. "Sure. Just stay alert, and don't freeze." Adderstar responded, slightly distracted as he surveyed his Clan and camp.

"Now. I remind you again, that this is a very important gathering. All that matters is that we keep peace, and make a decision about where this tension will go. EmberClan has always been greedy, and their current leader is incredibly power-hungry. More than likely, there will be some sort of fight, be it at the gathering, tomorrow, or a few days from now. Be prepared. Let's go!"

With that, he turned and began to lope up the tunnel, his Clan at his tail. Hopewilt followed along, the sticky concoction of herbs still plastered to her wound. The stinging had stopped, and the wound no longer felt like it was splitting her face open, but a dull ache presented itself any time she made too sudden a movement with her head.

Hopewilt's stomach danced with tiny songbirds. She was nervous, and excited for where the gathering was doomed to go. She vaguely remembered back to her first gathering, and the other apprentices she'd met there. Fallenpaw, Swanpaw, Shiverpaw, and of course, the cursed Rubypaw and Obsidiansmoke. They'll all probably be warriors by now, and new apprentices will have replaced them. She thought, as the mountain stone melted into trees, and then into the open path to the Sacred Willow.

As she was lost in thought, Tumblesoar ran up next to her. "Hey,

Hopewilt. How is that wound feeling?" He asked, never having lost his enthusiastic tone. "Oh- Hi, Tumblesoar. It's feeling fine." She responded, watching as the oaks, birches, and larches at the sides of the path slowly transitioned into pine and burnt-out trunks. They were in EmberClan territory now. "An owl attack, huh? That must have been awful." The lanky tom sympathized. "I'd have been *terrified*."

"Yeah. I was pretty scared." She mumbled, the small talk dwindling into silence as they drew nearer to the Sacred Willow. The night was clear, and unlike the night before, held not a breath of wind. It was almost eerily silent as the BleakClan warriors hurried through the night on their way to the gathering site, on edge and tense.

Finally, the last trees died away into a large clearing, filled with dozens upon dozens of pelts and voices, all milling around and blending together. The scents of four very different Clans made her dizzy, and it was very loud.

Luckily, EmberClan seemed to be late, and Hopewilt gave a sigh of relief. She was dreading sharing the same space as a cat that had nearly killed her brother, and a Clan who wanted to go to war. She knew the peace wouldn't last, and hurried to find a familiar face.

Rather quickly, Hopewilt's gaze landed on a familiar tortoiseshell pelt and amber eyes. Fallenpaw. Smoothing down her ruffled fur, she padded over to him, where, to her delight, Swanpaw also sat. Beside Swanpaw, a tiny white she-cat was pressed close to the older feline's flank. *A new apprentice, perhaps?*

Along with the three cats she knew, and the new apprentice, there was a pale gray she-cat with blue eyes. Fallenpaw's sister. But looking closer, she couldn't see Shiverpaw.

"Hi, guys, remember me? Last gathering?" The Swanpaw and Fallenpaw's eyes lit up, and they gathered around her. "How are you, Hopepaw? It's been so long!" Crowed Fallenpaw, much taller and more full-formed than he had been the last time she'd seen him. "Oh, I'm fine- I'm a warrior now!"

"Fantastic! So are we!" Swanpaw cheered excitedly, gesturing to the

gathered cats. "I'm Swanbubble now. Fallenpaw's called Fallenbird, and Morningpaw is Morningmist!"

"Those are great names. I'm Hopewilt!" Hopewilt smiled, glancing around one more time. "Where's Shiverpaw?" Swanbubble's face instantly dropped, and she looked at her paws. "Shiverpaw passed away- In an accident, last moon. There was a training exercise in a marsh, and she fell into some really deep mud and sank before we could grab her. We dug her out, but she'd drowned." Fallenbird placed a paw comfortingly on Swanbubble's. "A terrible tragedy."

A lump rose in Hopewilt's throat as she witnessed the grief written all across Swanbubble's angular face and the pain in her heather-blue eyes. She knew the hopeless feeling well. "I'm so sorry. My brother... He passed away too. In an avalanche accident. That's also how I lost my tail." She gestured to the stump and saw eyes widen all around her. "Oh, Hopewilt, I didn't even see it. It's so dark. We heard about the avalanche and saw the wreckage from our territory, but we didn't think anyone was hurt." Fallenbird whispered mournfully.

Swanbubble gazed at Hopewilt, a silent understanding between the two, grief shared between cats of different Clans.

Morningmist peered closer at the cream warrior, concerned. "What's with the leaves on your face, above your eye?" Hopewilt shrugged, trying to act nonchalant. "Just a bit of a scratch. An owl got me when I was hunting before dawn. Nothing major." Sympathetic murmurs came from all around, but no further questions were asked, much to her relief.

"Oh, I'm so rude," Swanbubble meowed, slapping her muzzle with one paw. "This is Clearpaw; She's deaf, and doesn't talk much. She's only been an apprentice for a moon or two." (**AUTHORS NOTE: Clearpaw existed as a character in Spottedsound's Survival as an insert to give more life to the Gatherings. However, this universe is her true home, and where her character and story are based.)** Clearpaw, a small, fluffy she-cat with large, pale gray ears and a bushy gray-tipped tail, stepped shyly out from beside Swanbubble and waved her paw in greeting. She had a diamond

marking on her forehead, and striking ice-blue eyes. An adorable, endearing cat, for sure.

Hopewilt greeted the little she-cat kindly and turned back to Swanbubble. "Is she your apprentice? I've never seen a cat get one so young." Swanbubble laughed. "No, she's Ottersplash's. He just put me in charge of showing her around and guiding her; besides, she's good company."

"EmberClan sure is late, huh?" Fallenbird meowed, peering around the clearing, and up to the stones at the foot of the Sacred Willow. The three leaders already perched there looked annoyed, and impatient. "Yeah. They'll show up soon."

As she spoke, a rustling noise broke through the chatter. The majority of the cats fell silent as EmberClan stalked through the bushes. There were a lot of cats, all strong and battle-scarred. She was able to pick out a few cats that had been in the confrontation patrol on the day of her assessment- Including Obsidiansmoke. Adderstar locked eyes with Flickerstar, who bared his fangs at the older tom. He quickly strutted up to his designated stone, and sat down, proud.

"Let the gathering begin."

Fun Fact: Further into the mountains, hours of travel away, there is said to be a Hot Springs/Thermal source that only BleakClan knows about. It used to be used quite regularly in the colder seasons but has since been more-or-less forgotten about.

War on the Horizon

[image]

Adderstar and Flickerstar! Art by me.

"Let the gathering begin."

Instantly a hush fell over the clearing, tense as the leaders glanced at each other, waiting for each other to make a move. After a moment, Ospreystar cleared her throat. "Is it alright if I start?" The three others nodded, and she began. "RippleClan is thriving as we prepare for the Snowfall season. The fish are slow and sluggish from the recent frost, making them easy prey, and we are strong in numbers. A new litter of kits was born a half-moon ago to Crystalflight, although with the recent loss of her mate, Swiftslip, Lilacwhisp has stepped in as a second parent; the two she-cats are doing a wonderful job rearing the two kits, Frostedkit, and Chirpkit." She paused to let the meows of congratulations die and continued.

"More notably, we have plenty of new apprentices to welcome. Mudpaw, Snakepaw, and Greenpaw, apprentices since a few days after the last gathering, and Clearpaw, a newer trainee. For being deaf and mute, she's doing a fantastic job in her training." Another pause, before, with a solemn expression on her face, she kept speaking.

"Tragically, we lost an apprentice, Shiverpaw, in a training accident. Her sister, Swanbubble, has continued on to receive her warrior name despite the grief. Other than that, I have nothing more to report." The crowd was mixed with sorrow over the death of Shiverpaw, and happiness for the new life brought to their Clan, and they quickly quieted as Quailstar stepped forward for her turn.

"Like RippleClan, MeadowClan is as strong as ever. After the heat of the summer, the moors have finally cooled, leaving us with a surplus of prey and strong ranks. We too have new kits, a litter of

three born to Ambereyes and Bravewhisper; Please welcome Sorrelkit, Sporekit, and Citrinekit." She surveyed the clearing as it erupted in sporadic cheers, and Hopewilt studied the battle-scarred she-cat's face. She had a regal, noble air, and her ice-green eyes gleamed with the experience of a lifetime. Quailstar was a cat to be reckoned with; A bold, strategic, proud feline without an ounce of doubt or shame about her life or leadership. Hopewilt envied her confidence silently.

"Recently, we chased a small pack of coyotes out of the west corner of our territory, and into unclaimed land. They haven't threatened us since. This moon, we welcome two new warriors- Morningmist and Fallenbird. In addition to new warriors, and new kits, the Elders' den welcomed a new member a few days ago; Burrowfuzz has made the decision to retire. Other than that, we have nothing new to report."

With a final nod, she stepped back, leaving Flickerstar and Adderstar standing at their rocks. Both stood competitively, waiting for the first to make a move, silent. Finally, Adderstar stepped up. "Since Flickerstar appears to be momentarily mute, I'll make my report." Flickerstar narrowed his eyes at the black-and-white tom but kept quiet.

"In the past five moons, plenty has happened with BleakClan. We are happy, healthy, and thriving, and although no new kits have been born yet, we do have two new warriors; Welcome Bluehawk, and Hopewilt." He paused to let the cheers die and continued. "But as you may have noticed, our Medicine cat apprentice isn't up here with us. He passed away in an accident nearly four moons ago- a heavy blow to our hearts." The Medicine cats at the roots of the tree bowed their heads solemnly. Frostedmoss dipped his lowest, clearly still missing Screechpaw.

"But nonetheless, we are still strong. We have worked hard to grow our herb stores and strengthen our Clan in preparation for Snowfall Season, and our borders remain as orderly and guarded as always." Clearly, the last statement was directed at EmberClan and a few murmurs rose from the crowd."

Fallenbird leaned over to Hopewilt, looking confused. "Is there

something going on between your Clan and EmberClan...? Because I'm kind of sensing some tension."

"Your sense is correct. They've been crossing our borders n' stuff for a while, and Adderstar's tired of it. He'll probably bring it up after EmberClan shares." Hopewilt answered absentmindedly.

Flickerstar finally stepped forward tail flicking back and forth. "I share last, as always," He muttered passive-aggressively, before regaining his composure. "EmberClan is as strong as ever- we have three new warriors, Obsidiansmoke, Flintspark, and Rubyglint, and two new apprentices, Diamondpaw and Scarletpaw." A few cheers rose up, but Hopewilt and most of the rest of BleakClan stayed coldly silent. I refuse to praise the Clan that hurt Screechpaw and are crossing our borders every day. "We had a litter of kits born to Russetstump, but two of the three passed away in a difficult birth. The remaining kit, Burrkit, is doing well."

Flickerstar paused, leading all to believe he was done. But before anyone could call an end to the gathering, or speak, he continued his speech with a malicious glint in his eye. "But past kits and apprentices, I have something bigger to share; BleakClan has been crossing our borders."

A gasp rose from all of the gathered cats, but BleakClan was more shocked than anyone. Hopewilt's chest burned with indignance. "Liar!" She called into the clamour, doubting anyone even heard. Adderstar stared at Flickerstar, hackles raised. "Flickerstar, you know that's not true. In fact, you're the one crossing our borders! I was just about to bring it up. Stop trying to twist everything around."

"You're the one twisting everything around, Adderstar," The black-and-ginger tom said smoothly, picking at the mossy rock under his paws. "Your pond-scum Clan has been stealing from us for moons."

Angry, Hopewilt turned to Fallenbird. "He's lying! EmberClan are the ones crossing our borders and stealing our prey." Fallenbird nodded slowly. "I believe you. EmberClan is sneaky- they've done things like this before. I had no doubt they'd do it again."

Adderstar's blue eyes sparked with rage, but he tried to keep himself calm. "I don't want a fight. I want to end this peacefully, okay? Can we agree that nobody crosses anyone's borders, and we stay away from each other-"

Before he could even finish, Flickerstar interrupted. "Well, I do want a fight. My Clan is growing; we need space and prey. We have new warriors, new apprentices, and new kits. What do you have? A dead apprentice, two barely-of-age warriors, and no kits. It's time to settle this like leaders. At dawn, near the birch grove, at the border, we fight. Bring all the warriors you want, but you can't win; You're weak. " Flickerstar snarled.

"Fine- Dawn it is. We'll see who's weak when you're running with your tail between your legs, coward. This means war." Adderstar retorted, past wanting peace. The crowd was in an uproar now, cats turning on each other, yelling and arguing. Quickly, Quailstar and Ospraystar called their Clans to leave. Then, still jeering at BleakClan, EmberClan slowly left the clearing. Adderstar stood in the trampled grass, looking angry, defeated, scared, and ready to fight every cat in EmberClan at the same time.

After a moment of silence, he called the Clan and began walking back to camp. Worry ate at Hopewilt as they travelled; sure, BleakClan wasn't exactly weak. But they sure as hell didn't have as many cats, or as brutal of fighting tactics. The day would end in Bloodshed, she was sure.

Yet, as much as she feared the resulting carnage, Hopewilt felt a tingle of excitement in her pads at the thought of experiencing her first fight.

Fun Fact: Flickerstar is younger than Adderstar by around 15 moons.

Sorry that this chapter was a little bit short!

Murderer

[image]

Hopewilt in the moment before disaster.

This chapter contains graphic violence and death. Reader discretion is advised.

Dawn reared its rose-tinted head, staining the few clouds that covered the horizon an eerie bloodred. The ground was covered in a delicate sheen of white; the first snow had fallen while BleakClan slept, and although it was thin, it stung Hopewilt's paw pads as she walked, and tingled in her nose.

The air was thick with tension. Every warrior had come prepared, bearing shining fur and clean teeth and claws. The only cats left at the camp were Frostedmoss and the three elders, all preparing herbs for the wounded. One she-cat, Flurryflank, had been tasked with staying in the bushes lining the clearing, and pulling away any wounded cats to treat them- she'd received minimal medicine training as an apprentice and knew how to treat most wounds.

Hopewilt felt jumpy, and a little bit queasy in the pit of her stomach. She'd never been in a real Clan-against-Clan battle before. But she looked fearsome and tough, with the freshly scabbing wound over one eye, her stump of a tail, clearly from an accident, and the scars on her shoulders giving her the appearance of being much older than she really was. She forced herself to look and feel confident and kept walking in the direction of Birch Grove.

"Hopewilt," A voice in her ear caused her to jump, ears pinned back. But it was only Gentlebreeze, looking concerned, her honey-gold eyes burning into her daughters. "Hopewilt, are you sure you're ready to fight? That wound of yours hasn't even fully scarred. You're a new warrior! And this is a big battle."

"Yes, I'm fine, Mother," She sighed. "I can handle it." She didn't let any annoyance creep into her voice, knowing that her mother was just paranoid. She'd lost one kit; she'd never want to lose another.

"Be careful, please. I don't think another injury would fare well for you..." She pleaded, voice trailing off as they approached the Birch Grove. The leaves had been stripped from the spindly white-blotched branches, the bonelike trees towering over the Clan, their branches closely knit together in a dense canopy. Hopewilt remembered when she and Tumblesoar had found a little russet apprentice trespassing near the area- just another spy EmberClan had sent into their land. Anger burned in her chest. It was about time someone put a stop to it.

Adderstar turned at the front of the crowd, his gaze scanning the twenty-odd warriors in his command. He looked nervous, the bags under his eyes showing through his fur. It was clear stress was weighing on the aging leader. Lynxfury stood at her partner's side, pressed against him for comfort. They were a powerful couple; leader and deputy, yet in that moment, they looked less than strong.

Hopewilt peered through the trees, watching for movement. Nothing showed. She felt cats jump around her as some sort of corvid let out a loud call in the trees above them. She watched as the great dark bird soared out of its perch and away toward the mountain. From where she was, it looked to be a crow. But it could have been a jackdaw or a magpie. *Why am I focusing on a bird? Get your head out of the clouds, Hopewilt.* She thought, shaking her head and picking her paws up one at a time, ridding them of snow.

"Hah... Maybe they aren't coming," Adderstar chuckled to himself, having been stood in the clearing for almost ten minutes. "I knew they were all talk, no bite."

Oh, you idiot. Hopewilt smirked to herself. *Everybody knows what happens when you say stuff like that. They come right after, and make you look stupid. It's like a rule of the world.* But as she waited another few seconds, nobody showed. No distant war cries, no rustling in the underbrush, no snow crunching under heavy paw steps. The sun had risen higher above the horizon, and now the red tint in the

clouds had spread to the rest of the sky, casting a strange glow over the whole forest.

But just as BleakClan had accepted that they weren't coming, a twig cracked just behind the bush line. Hopewilt's hackles rose along her neck like a row of icicles, and she set her muscles. EmberClan warriors began to push their way through the trees, led by Flickerstar. His smouldering amber eyes gleamed with excitement and a sort of intimidating wildness. There were a lot of warriors. At least three to five more than BleakClan had. And most of them were large- Typical of EmberClan.

"Finally decided to show up, huh? What kept you waiting? *Scared*?" Adderstar jabbed, tail switching back and forth in the snow.

"Scared? Oh, no. Not scared. They say that being late is *classy*- being early is just anxious."

"Typical. You care more about your appearance and your stupid entrance, than the war itself." Adderstar snapped, and Hopewilt watched as the last warrior filed into the clearing, and stood poised behind their commander. She recognized a few- Flickerstar and his deputy, Cinderburr, obviously, and then Obsidiansmoke and Rubyglint, their brother Flintspark, and a few warriors she didn't know the names of.

"Your ego will be your downfall, Flickerstar." He proclaimed, a look of confusion crossing his face as Flickerstar started to laugh.

"Oh! My downfall? Mine? I think that my ego will be *your* downfall if it hurts anybody." He jeered, teeth gleaming in the dawn.

"EmberClan, attack!"

In a second, Hopewilt was hurled into the perils of battle. Screeches and cries rose from the huge writhing mass of cats, fueled by their anger and hatred for each other. She snarled as some pale brown striped tom crashed into her side, his dark yellow eyes filled with adrenaline. She struck out, a heavy blow to the enemy warrior's shoulder, and he lurched sideways, disappearing as quickly as he had appeared. Through the mess of pelts, falling fur and splashing

blood, she recognized a familiar russet pelt. It had an odd tint- almost pink- with black on her shoulders and back. The apprentice spy, from moons ago.

She tried to push her way through the crowd, but a black-and-gray ticked she-cat intercepted her, hazel eyes burning, long tail thrashing against the ground. Hopewilt didn't recognize this malicious molly, but it was clear she wasn't going to leave without a fight. She launched herself at the grayscale cat, tumbling to the frosted ground with a snarl, catching one bony shoulder in her teeth and ripping it open violently. The EmberClan warrior cursed, turning on Hopewilt with blood running down her chest and leg in a scarlet river.

Hopewilt's voice caught in her throat as she was tossed onto her shoulder, pain reverberating down her spine at the impact. She quickly struggled to her paws and attacked again, pummeling the older stranger's body with targeted strikes. The she-cat's hazel eyes sparked with panic as she stumbled, and finally turned tail, disappearing with a cry. Panting hard, lungs burning, alive with the thrill of the battle, she stood for a second and watched the chaos.

A copper tang of blood hung heavy on the air, crimson mist blurring both Clan's logic and reason. Bodies thumped against the hard earth, screams and wails split the sky, and claws swung with brutal ferocity, striking home on their enemy's battered bodies. What had started as a fair fight had devolved into a struggle that was meant to leave cats from both sides lifeless on the ground.

Part of Hopewilt hated the sight. Despised it. Wanted to shut her eyes, curl on the ground, and shut it all out. It brought back too many memories. But part of her also wanted it to last longer; wanted to feel the triumph of winning. Wanted to watch them flee. Craved the taste of victory. It scared her... But she felt so alive.

Hopewilt suddenly felt claws hook into her flank and spun to see a misty gray tabby apprentice staring at her, teeth bared in a snarl. She looked young- Really young. A new apprentice, probably one of the two announced at the gathering the day before. Hopewilt swung at the little she-cat, claws sheathed, but she dodged, leaping aside before landing a strike on the older warrior's foreleg.

She snarled, the new wound stinging with fresh blood, and leaped at her new opponent, her stocky body easily bowling the slender EmberClan apprentice onto her back, exposing her soft, vulnerable belly. Terror shone in her yellow eyes, and she squirmed helplessly. Not wanting to kill the apprentice- Cats didn't deserve to die young, no matter their Clan- she lifted her paws to let her escape.

But the apprentice didn't take the lucky shot.

She sprang to her nimble paws, spitting, fangs flashing, and launched herself at Hopewilt again. Sharp claws tore into her ear, leaving blood coursing down her face in rivulets. A series of long tears stretched from the tattered tip to the base of her skull. The wound was dangerously close to potentially ruining her hearing forever. Pain shocked through the young warrior, a white-hot flash.

"You little-"

Blinded by pain and anger, blood tricking steadily into one eye, coincidentally the same one she'd nearly lost to Bluehawk only two nights ago, she struck a heavy blow at her young attacker.

She meant for it to strike a shoulder, her chest, maybe her muzzle or face- something to scare the apprentice away. But instead, when she blinked the spray of blood from her eyes, she saw a jagged furrow stretched across her throat.

Blood poured down the ruffled gray fur of her chest, dripping down her legs and pooling at her paws. A look of shock crossed the young she-cat's face, and she met Hopewilt's horrified gaze with one final attempt at a snarl.

Hopewilt couldn't move. Couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, as the EmberClan apprentice crumpled to the ground. Crimson spread around her, a gruesome halo framing her youthful form.

The apprentice's mouth opened and closed, blood bubbling at her lips, and dribbling from her small, pink nose. For the first time, she noticed a scar just above it- *but why would that matter?* Hopewilt crept forward, all noise around her droning into a high-pitched wail.

For a moment, it was just the two of them in the clearing; a dying apprentice, and her killer.

"I'm sorry," Hopewilt choked, "I'll get a Medicine cat, hold on," But the apprentice held her gaze, bumblebee yellow meeting amber and gold, and opened her mouth as if trying to speak. But only a whispery squeak came out.

Expressions of hatred, terror, pain, pleading, and finally peaceful acceptance flitted through her clouding eyes before the light faded out of them. With her features relaxed in death, she looked much younger than she had in life. Practically a kit. Too young to be fighting in a bloodbath...

Too young to die.

Bile rose in Hopewilt's throat, bitter and burning, and she vomited everything she'd eaten in the last day onto the bloodstained grass, chest heaving and eyes watering. The watering in her eyes turned to tears as she sobbed at the head of the cat- no, the kit- she'd murdered.

Screechpaw's death invaded her mind, punishing her. The look on both of the young cat's faces. Their eyes, both different shades of gold, the light fading from them. Their limbs splayed, eyes unseeing.

She didn't even notice as a hush fell over the clearing, both sides standing mixed together, panting and bleeding. Bodies were laid all over the ground, some still breathing and struggling to rise, some unmoving. With a flash of horror, she saw Gentlebreeze lying on the ground, thankfully still breathing, but badly injured.

Tumblesoar limped, supported by Lyxnfury, as his mangled paw dragged on the ground. Adderstar panted hard, his flank split with an angry red wound. Darkdaisy was still on the ground, sapphire eyes open but unseeing. She was dead. Both Clans were battered, but from how many EmberClan warriors were still standing, pride in their eyes, it was apparent who had come out on top.

"It's clear who's won, Adderstar. Drag your wounded and dead

home. I'll allow you that mercy."

Adderstar's face was full of pain, emotional and physical, as he turned and surveyed everything. His gaze landed on Hopewilt, shaking his head at the corpse at her paws. *This wasn't supposed to lead to death...*

Hopewilt's entire body felt disconnected and numb, tears still dripping down her cheeks. As she started to move shakily to Gentlebreeze's side, she heard a shriek from behind her. Looking back, the russet apprentice spy was crouched over the pile of gray tabby fur, shaking. "Diamondpaw! Wake up- Come on, we won! Get up." The young cat's voice turned angry with desperation, shaking the dead apprentice's bloodied shoulder. "You promised you'd be safe! You promised you wouldn't leave me... Sister, please...." Her mew broke, and she buried her nose in the cooling fur of her sister's pelt.

Hopewilt's heart split in two, guilt nearly tearing her to shreds. *I lost my sibling and it nearly killed me. How could I take another cat's sister away from them? Even if they are an enemy? I'm a monster.*

She shut her eyes tight, the sounds of cats fading. EmberClan had left, and BleakClan was leaving, supporting and carrying the injured and the dead. Hopewilt stood in the clearing, trying to stop nausea from overwhelming her again. Trying to stop the flood of guilt and memories. Trying to stay upright, through the spinning in her head.

Too heartsick to face her Clan, she turned away from the slowly moving crowd and fled into the frost-edged forest.

Fun Fact: The russet apprentice's name is Scarletpaw, and she was my original Dark Forest/Land of Shattered Moons OC! Hopewilt/Poisonberry was originally her sidekick, but that changed, and Scarletstar is no longer one of my mains but is a background character here!

So sorry about the lack of recent updates! Writer's block is a bitch.

Alone

[image]

"Guilt," Art by me!

Death was a normal part of Hopewilt's life- It was a normal part of the lives of all warriors. Death lived as a shadow cast over the heads of every living thing, waiting, watching, poised to strike at any moment. Death could come in hundreds of forms. Peaceful, like old age, or brutal and bloody like the attack of a wolf, or painful and slow, like a bought of Greencough.

But Hopewilt couldn't get used to the counterpart of life, the natural end to every being's existence. It scared her beyond reason. She felt as though death had chosen her as its target, taking those she loved, and guiding her claws to deal the killing blow to an innocent cat.

As she tossed and turned in the nest of brittle grass, she felt dread creeping over her, a cloud of despair. It settled into her fur, heavy and cloying like the scent of blood that still lingered in her nose. A chill wreaked her body, and half-dried tears streaked her matted cheeks, only adding to the cold in her body, and her heart.

She was a killer. An outcast. A young counterpart of the terrible legends that lived in the Land of Shattered Moons, on track to join their ranks.

She sat up with a gasp, gazing in despair through the bare branches of her 'den', the old Antlerberry bush that had housed her in the night after Bluehawk's attack. Dried berries still hung on the branches, shrivelled yet forever potent. They seemed like a perfect compliment to the cat they sheltered. Unassuming on the outside, yet housing terrible danger, and secrets that few knew.

The day had passed in a feverish haze, littered with tears and nightmares, and waves of despair and guilt. It was now close to dusk, yet Hopewilt felt no urge to return home. Her leg stung where

Diamondpaw had sliced through her fur and flesh, but the wound was scabbing and it showed no sign of infection. She was sore, and her body ached with the strain of fighting off the many cats whom she had come into conflict with, and she felt as though she had been standing in a sandstorm, the way her eyes burned.

But she was alive. Unlike Diamondpaw, Darkdaisy, and the unnamed bodies scattered in the clearing after the fight, and potentially even her own mother, if her injuries had been too severe. *If Gentlebreeze died, I'd have no one. Bluehawk isn't kin, as far as I'm concerned.*

The thought of being completely alone scared her, in a helpless way. She yearned to feel touch, to feel love, to feel the warmth of the company of another cat. If only a brush of fur against her pelt, fleeting like a bird in flight.

But I ruin all of the relationships I have, don't I? I'm not worthy of that kind of affection.

She felt the pressure of tears building again, but none seemed to fall, her eyes already exhausted. Where there should have been hunger, Hopewilt felt only numbness- And even if she had felt hungry, there would be no possibility of catching prey. Her lousy skills and the weariness that was heavy in her bones would spell failure before she even started.

Instead, Hopewilt stood up and began to walk. She knew not where she was going, nor where she would stop, but she needed to take her mind off of the day's events. Laying in silence left too much room for thoughts she didn't want or need.

Dusk eased up into the sky like blood staining a supermassive leaf. It was scarlet and pale, like the sunrise at dawn earlier that day. A bitter breeze ruffled Hopewilt's thick Snowfall-season coat, and the musty scent of damp, dead greenery hung subtly on the forest floor. The snow of that morning had all but melted, leaving drab brown in its place.

Leafloss was very different from Snowgone. Hopewilt remembered the thick canopy of leaves that had once sheltered her on her hunts,

the sweet emerald hues of the grass, and the pastel flowers that had littered the ground- now withered and dead. She wistfully thought of the firey amber, crimson and gold leaves that had hung from the trees not more than a few weeks ago, but those were a temporary thing. Beautiful but short-lived, like most things in the world.

She wandered as day melted into dusk, then into darkness, reaching the border of the territory and pausing there. Beyond this border, there was no enemy Clan- it was open forest and fields, unexplored by cats in recent history. In the past, there'd been troops sent out to scout for suitable land or notable landmarks or other cats, but not much had been found. It was even rumoured there was an unimaginably massive lake that tasted of tears somewhere a few seasons' worth of travel away, but no one had ever dared to find it.

She peered into the dark across the scent line, the last muted gray light quickly fading. She could, in theory, leave. By the time anyone came looking for her- if they did at all, it would be the morning- or maybe later. And by then, she'd be long gone, a leaf on the breeze, a whisper in the trees. A loner. A non-permanent soul. It was dangerous, sure, but so was staying with BleakClan. Bluehawk's threats hung over her head, and she had no doubt he would find a reason to make them true.

But the second she stepped over the border, a sense of dread washed over her. She couldn't just... Go. It was too sudden. Too permanent. Cats would forget about her- About Screechpaw, about her story. Seasons would pass, and Hopewilt would be a foreign name on her Clan's tongue.

And being a dead, forgotten cat in the memories of all she'd ever loved seemed a worse fate than really dying.

So she turned back, her limbs beginning to ache again, her eyes yearning to close. She wouldn't return that night, or maybe even the next, but she would stay in the territory. It was familiar and safe, at least. She could gather her thoughts, distract herself, and try to compose her shattered psyche. If that was possible.

~❄~

Three days had passed since Hopewilt had been in her camp. She avoided patrols like the plague, only running into two- One of which had tried to bring her back, which she had declined, lying to them and telling her skeptical Clanmates that she was only hunting, and would return by dusk, and one of which who had barely acknowledged her, instead fixing cold stares firmly at their paws while they walked.

They no longer trusted Hopewilt as far as they could throw her, which was just fine by her. A recluse's life suited her. She played by her own rules and planned her own days, spending them fixing up her new den- a different Antlerberry bush at a secluded far corner of the territory near where she had contemplated running away permanently- hunting to regain her strength, and collecting any interesting object she could find. Namely, small bones.

She was really doing anything possible to distract herself from her own thoughts. Her Nightmares had returned, and they were brutal, leaving her in a cold sweat, chest heaving.

But the worst one had to be the one she'd had the night before.

In this dream, she was back in the birch grove battling an apprentice. But instead of Diamondpaw, it was Screechpaw pinned under her claws. She watched, helpless and unable to stop herself as his life seeped away, blood spilling blood, his honey-golden eyes going dull and lifeless for what seemed like the thousandth time. And instead of the horrible guilt she'd felt after killing the apprentice in real life, in this version, she felt triumphant. Like she'd accomplished some great feat. Proud, even... She'd woken up with tears in her eyes, panting, her claws dug into the ground so hard they ached, and she didn't fall back to sleep that night. She was too disturbed.

Hopewilt had hoped the dreams had left once and for all, but it was clear they hadn't.

From the chill, and the heavyness of the air, it was clear that snow was coming. Once again, Hopewilt contemplated returning home, but she didn't. She patched a few more gaps between the branches of her new den, and sat in her nest, fiddling with a tiny rib bone

that she'd found in the forest, watching as the flakes began intermidently falling.

She let numbness settle over her body again, cold, and heavy, and cloying like the snow outside, and let out a long sigh.

Maybe she deserved the nightmares.

Fun Fact: Hopewilt's mother is alive, and no other cats perished from their wounds in the battle.

I am so sorry about the lack of recent updates, life is so hectic right now, and my writing has to take a back seat for a while- I'll try to get a chapter out once in a while!

Announcement...

Hey, everyone. I know I haven't been super consistent with updating this fic in the last while, and I apologize for that. But my motivation has been really going downhill for a while, and I wanted to add an update just to inform the readers of this book on its status.

Poisonberry's Vengeance will be going on a semi-permanent Hiatus. I'm not sure if I'll continue it in the future, let alone finish it, which really hurts to say, because I was very passionate about this in the beginning, but now, it just isn't fun to write for me anymore. It's more stressful than anything, and I'm tired of pushing through one chapter every two months only to have it get 5 reads and die out again. It's not anyone's fault, it's just that this site is slowly fading in relevancy.

I may update once in a blue moon, when I get a rare burst of motivation, but I don't know, and I'm sorry that I don't know.

I just need to take it slow with writing for the next little while, likely for the summer and maybe into the fall. I won't leave, like I announced earlier, but I will be less active, and if I come back, this work will not be the priority. Fallen Stars will be taking more of my time.

I'm truly very sorry if there's anyone who's been looking forward to updates from Poisonberry's Vengeance, but my era in the Warriors Fandom is slowly drawing to a close. This is also very painful for me to say, because Warriors is what brought me onto Wattpad, and I was SO passionate about it. But I'm growing up, my style is evolving, and it's just... Lost its prior shine.

I'm sorry, guys. It's been awesome writing and experimenting with this work. I love all of you <3

-ThatLovelyDove